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"STOP THAT!" WAS THE MARSHAL'S STERN COMMAND. "I DON'T ALLOW ANYBODY BUT MYSELF TO FIGHT IN THIS TOWN!"

OR,
THE MARSHAL OF SANDSTONE.

BY MAJOR DANIEL BOONE DUMONT
(Of the U. S. Army),
AUTHOR OF "SILVER SAM, DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.
COL. DOUBLE-EDGE.

"HALT that hearse!"

It was not the first time that such an order had been heard on the road that ran through the San Miguel valley, and there could be no doubt of the meaning of this one.

The "hearse" in question was the regular stage to San Miguel.

It well deserved the name, as it was a most funereal-looking appliance for the conveyance of passengers and light freight.

If it ever had any best days, it had long since seen the last of them, and had become a rusty, creaky, dilapidated concern, such as was a disgrace even to the wretched horse that dragged it over the unfrequented road.

The driver, who was perched up on the box with no other company than that of a rusty express-box and a consumptive mail boy, though a

withered and weazen specimen of his kind, looked as though he was thoroughly ashamed of the entire outfit.

It would have been the opinion of an unprejudiced observer that any road-agents who could be mean enough to hold up such a hearse as that must be very hard up indeed.

Perhaps they were.

The man who hailed the driver was tall and dark-featured, with a commanding tone of voice, and his hail was backed by the persuasive appearance of a Winchester rifle that was leveled at the driver.

It was not yet dusk, and he could clearly be seen as he stepped out from a group of pinyon trees near the side of the road.

Just behind him stood another man, somewhat younger than the other and much lighter—the featherweight of the road-agent partnership.

He also carried a rifle, but was not threatening anybody, though he held it so that it could be instantly brought into action.

On the features of each was a rather comical look of disgust as his eyes rested on the antiquated contraption which passed for a stage.

It was as if an eager fisherman, supposing himself to have hooked a fine bass, should pull up a toadfish.

Yet there were rich pickings to be had occasionally by gentlemen in their line of business, even on the San Miguel road and in that unpromising conveyance.

The driver of the vehicle pulled up his horses immediately.

Both he and they seemed to have no objection to the interruption that had occurred.

The horses were naturally glad enough to cease dragging the unwieldy contraption over that rough road, and the driver was doubtless ready to welcome any sort of a relief from the monotony of the trip.

As for the passengers, they did not evince the least disposition to have the so-called hearse converted into a hearse in reality.

Not one of them showed any anxiety to do anything that might cause him to be converted into a corpse.

There were three of them—only three—and the highway robber who could expect to make a fortune by fleecing that party must have been veridant indeed.

One was a poverty-stricken Mexican, silent and apparently unconcerned.

Another was a drummer, spare of flesh, sandy-haired and hungry-eyed, whose only capital doubtless consisted in his cheek.

The third was a middle-aged man, stout of frame, heavy of face, and largely bearded, who might possibly be a substantial ranchman, but whose appearance gave no indication of wealth.

When the stage was halted, the drummer was the only one of the party who had enough courage or curiosity to even glance out of the open window.

"It's Colonel Double-edge and his partner," said he. "This is the second time I've been caught in a stage that those chaps have struck."

"That's a queer name," observed the big man who looked like a ranchman. "Is Double-edge the man's real name?"

"I don't suppose it's the name he was christened by, if he ever had the luck to be christened, and I don't suppose he was ever any sort of a colonel anywhere. That is only one of the names he goes by, and I judge it is a kind of fancy handle. Another of his names, as I have heard it, is Devil Dick, and that suits him so well that you don't catch me speaking disrespectfully of him where he can hear it."

The big man took from his pocket, a flat leather wallet—very flat, as if any value it might have contained had melted away before that point was reached.

From the wallet he took a piece of note paper, on which he hastily scribbled a few words.

He then folded the paper in the form of a note, turned down a corner, addressed it to "Col. Double-edge," and placed it in the wallet, which he put away in his breast pocket.

In this performance, though without appearing to do so, he kept his writing out of the reach of the curious glances of the drummer.

In the mean time the two road-agents had not been idle, though they seemed to be in no special hurry to get through with their part of the programme.

"Throw down the express-box, my friend," ordered the leader.

The driver leisurely gave that article a push with his foot, and it bounced off the stage and tumbled down into the road.

"You won't find a fortune in that, I'm afraid, colonel," he said with a contortion of his withered features that may have been meant for a smile.

The box dropped so lightly and with such a hollow sound as to give point to this remark:

"Keep that hearse covered, Ben," was the direction of the leader to his companion: "If anybody moves or winks, pitch an ounce of lead into him."

The assistant road-agent proceeded to do the rifle act, while his principal picked up a heavy stone and smashed in the top of the box.

"I reckon you would prefer to carry this thing in with you," he said to the driver, "and

so I will give it back to you after I get what I want out of it."

The driver only grinned.

An inspection of the box soon satisfied Colonel Double-edge, or whatever he might choose to be named, that disgust was mainly what he would get out of it.

There were no bars of silver or gold—not the least bit of bullion of any sort.

Besides some articles that were of no value to the road-agent, the box contained three small money packages and a few watches, which had been sent to be repaired.

Col. Double-edge stuffed the money and the watches into one of the capacious pockets of the rough coat he wore, and ordered the mail-bag to be thrown down to him.

The driver complied willingly enough with this request, picking up the small leather pouch with one finger and slinging it down into the road.

This was quite unpromising, and the result proved that the mail-bag was of even less account than the express-box.

A sharp knife speedily slit the leather, and the scanty contents were unceremoniously hustled out upon the ground.

There they were as unceremoniously examined by Col. Double-edge, while his partner kept the stage and its passengers passive with his leveled rifle.

It was with a look of intense disgust that he inspected the few papers and letters that were spread before him.

There was not a registered letter in the file, and there were only three or four that looked or felt as if they might possibly contain a little money in bills.

He stuffed those into his pocket with the watches and express packages, and gave the pouch a contemptuous kick as he rose to his feet.

"I've got my opinion," said he, "of any people who would send a stage over this route, and of any company that would run an express on it. It's the most sneaking, measly, poverty-stricken business that any white men could engage in."

"What's your opinion, colonel, of a man who would hold up a stage on this route?" demanded the driver, who was bold enough when he had reason to believe that he was not going to get hurt.

"It's my opinion that he ought to be hung, and the sooner he's caught and strung up, the better. But you may just bet your sweet life that I won't be caught doing it again. You may run the wheels off of your durned old rattletraps before I interfere with them."

"All the same to me, colonel. I don't keer if you smash the old hearse and make a bonfire of it."

"Look here, young chap, you're a bit too fresh, and your jaw is inclined to run away with itself. Take that as a warning to keep your tongue between your teeth and to speak only when you are spoken to. Trot out your passengers now. I will have to go through them, though I don't like to do that sort of thing."

The driver leaned over the side of the stage and addressed himself to the three men inside.

"Say, gentlemen, Col. Double-edge wants to know if you'll be so kind as to step out thar for a minute or two."

This invitation had been expected, and the passengers were prepared to comply with the polite request.

"That means us," observed the drummer. "I won't kick, as it's precious little I've got to lose."

"I'm fixed for this sort of thing," remarked the big man.

The Mexican said nothing, but quietly and stolidly followed his fellow passengers as they got out of the stage.

The leader of the road-agents had drawn a handsome revolver, which he held in one hand or the other during the remainder of the performance, and his partner had followed his example.

Quite naturally, and as if they were accustomed to that sort of thing, the three victims ranged themselves in a line and held up their hands, while Col. Double-edge passed before them and divested them of all the weapons they had in sight.

Then he proceeded to search them.

He began with the Mexican, and the beginning was both unprofitable and disgusting, panning out nothing better than a few greasy silver coins and a strong odor of garlic.

Almost equally unprofitable, though less disgusting, was the drummer, who indicated with alacrity where his small store of money was to be found.

"Sorry that I can't do more for you, colonel," said he; "but the fact is that my firm don't allow me to collect any bills, and they give me scarcely enough cash for expenses."

"The less you have to say about it the better," observed the bandit. "This thing is bad enough without any talk."

When he came to the big ranchman, that individual had a word to say.

"You will find a wallet in my left breast pocket," said he. "It contains all the money I have with me."

Col. Double-edge took out the wallet and sneered as he looked at it.

Evidently its appearance did not please him, as he proceeded to search the man, but found nothing more of value.

"I wish you would keep the wallet just as it is," remarked the ranchman. "There is something in it that you may like to see."

"Seems to me that I'll have to get a microscope to find it," sneeringly replied the bandit.

He stuffed the wallet into his pocket, and ordered the passengers back to the stage.

"Get away from here!" he shouted. "Pick up your measly box and bag, and start your broken-down team as soon as you can! I hate the sight of such a poverty-stricken gang."

CHAPTER II.

AN EYE-OPENER.

THE driver of the San Miguel stage crawled down from his seat, picked up the broken express-box, and put it back in its place.

Then he stuffed into the pouch the mail that remained on the ground, slung that up, and saw that his valuable cargo of passengers was safely stowed away.

He seemed to be really disappointed because his outfit had got off so easily, and was inclined to dally with the situation and protract his start, until a sharp and peremptory order from Col. Double-edge made him jump up to his seat and hurry forward his wretched steeds at a pace that threatened to dislocate the old vehicle.

The two bandits stood there with their weapons in their hands, and watched the outfit until it disappeared from view.

Again a look of profound disgust came over the bronzed and strong features of the leader.

"This is by all odds the roughest deal we've had yet," he remarked, "and that's saying enough for it, Satan knows."

"It is enough to make a man turn virtuous and shuck pinyons for a living," answered the other. "If our luck don't change pretty soon, we had better hang ourselves and save some sheriff the trouble."

"I don't know what we will make out to do, Ben, as this sort of business pans out so badly. I reckon I will have to take to preaching, and you—perhaps you might sing in the choir."

"Where's the choir? I'd pity the church where you got hold of the contribution-boxes. But there's no joke in this, Dick. It is my opinion now, as it has been for some time, that we had better quit this flea-begotten, sand-ridden Territory."

"All right, Ben. Shall we go back to Texas?"

"No, thank you. No Texan in mine, if you please. One taste of the convict-gang down there is enough to last me a lifetime. I don't fancy being chased by dogs, either."

"Well, let's get away from this road. The sight of it makes me sick."

They walked back into a little hollow in the hills where they had left their horses—two fleet and powerful animals, well caparisoned, and furnished with saddle-bags that were as yet fairly provided with the necessities of life.

When they had thrown their legs over the backs of the animals, one of them at least felt much better and inclined to take a brighter view of affairs.

"After all, Ben," remarked Col. Double-edge, "a man's not so bad off anywhere, when he has a real good horse under him, and is as well supplied with first-class weapons of war as we are now."

"There's something in that," answered the other. "We haven't made them pay very well so far; but it's a comfort to know that we've got them."

"Yes, and we know how to use them. That being the case, there's sure to be plenty of chances for us, somewhere or somewhere else."

"Something better, I hope, than skinning Greasers and catching fleas."

"Oh, we will find openings, never fear. Men of our caliber are needed in more ways than one in such a country as this. Spur up, Ben! night is coming on, and we must find a pleasant place to camp. When we get outside of some decent grub and a little good whisky, and settle down to a comfortable smoke, our cares will fly away, and we will see things in a better light."

An hour's ride brought them to a pleasant little glen, where they found running water and grass.

What more could men in their position desire?

Nothing, just then, except the "decent grub" of which the leader had spoken, and for which they were both longing.

After caring for their horses, they built a fire, produced their saddle-bags, and proceeded to cook the "decent grub."

It was not much to brag of, and their cooking might have been improved upon in some quarters; but they had excellent appetites, and not only made a hearty meal, but enjoyed it as well as if their consciences had been spotless.

This repast was preceded and followed by draughts of a strong and seductive fluid from flasks of a dark color with which their pockets were provided.

After their pipes were lighted they found

themselves in a comfortable frame of mind and body, prepared to consider their situation calmly and to take as pleasant a view of their affairs as circumstances would allow.

The next thing in order was an inspection of the spoils of the day—not a division of the profits, as Col. Double-edge was the banker of the firm—but a figuring up to see what a division would amount to.

First came the express packages, which footed up, as had been expected, only a moderate amount, and their leanness caused the partners to indulge in some sarcastic remarks at the expense of the senders and the express company.

Next came the few letters that had been selected from the mail pouch, and they were even of less account than the express packages, their contents amounting only to a few dollars.

The watches were viewed with more favor.

Two of them were of fair value, and one other would at that time and place be considered worth about \$300.

Altogether, the booty was not to be sneezed at, and yet it was by no means of sufficient value, in view of the risk they ran, to pay the bandits for their trouble.

"Well, Ben," observed Col. Double-edge, "we have good cause to grumble at our luck, and yet we might be a durned sight worse off. There's enough to be got out of this day's labor to give us a pretty decent sort of a spree, if we cared to go in for frivolity."

"Where would we go to take the spree?" growled his companion. "I judge that all the settlements in these parts are shut against us by this time, or only the jail end of them is open."

"Nonsense! We are not near as famous as you seem to suppose. The fact is, Ben, that you have been afraid of the face of man ever since you were laid by the heels in Texas. We could both go to plenty of towns about here if we cared to, and I am willing to bet you the value of that heavy watch that I can take it even to Gonzalez any day and sell it there."

"I won't make the bet, Dick, because I don't want you to run any such risk."

"Not much risk about it. Hello! here's one little matter that I'd forgot."

Col. Double-edge took from his pocket the wallet which he had got from the big ranchman and smiled sardonically as he felt its suspicious thinness.

"Looks as if an elephant had trod on it," he observed. "No wonder the cuss was so willing to give it away. One thing is certain—there can't be any infernal machine in it to blow us to bits—and not much of anything else, for that matter."

"What can the man have meant?" inquired Ben, "when he said there was something in it that you might like to see?"

"That's more than I can tell you, my boy. I will look inside, though it don't seem to be worth while."

Col. Double-edge opened the wallet, and found there a new and crisp \$10 bill.

"That's all I see," he said, "except a bit of white paper. Hello!"

He had pulled out the bit of white paper, which was folded in the form of a note, and was staring at it.

"What's the matter, Dick?"

"I'll be blown if this thing ain't a letter to me! That is, it's addressed to Colonel Double-edge, and I answer for that gentleman."

"That is a little queer."

"Should say it is. This is the thing, I reckon, which he said I might be glad to see. How did the man know me? I didn't know him. What can it be, now?"

"Maybe it's an invitation to play the leading part in a public hanging performance. Suppose you open it and see."

This was an easy thing to do, and the bandit's face brightened as he glanced over the scrawl.

"Spit it out, Dick!" implored his partner.

"You do seem to be a bit glad of it."

"Well, this is a sort of an eye-opener, and I don't know but I may call it a straightener. He calls me Col. Double-edge, just as if we were old pals, and says that he made the trip in that stage on purpose to meet me."

"He didn't seem to be anxious to claim your acquaintance, though, when he did meet you."

"That's a fact; but it was private business that he had with me, and he thought it best to put it into this note. He says that he has heard of me, that he has a use for just such a man as I am, and that he will pay me big money if I will do the work he wants done."

"Rough work, I reckon," suggested Ben.

"No doubt of that, though he don't give a hint of its style. He wants me to go to see him and get full particulars and terms."

"Where do I come in, then?"

"You are included in the invitation. It calls for me and my partner."

"Do you suppose that he really means business? It may be a trick to get hold of us."

"Oh, he's all right, and is business clear down to the toe-nails."

"Who is the man, anyhow?"

"Jack Koopman, who runs a big cattle-ranch in the Gonzalez district—one of the cattle barons, as they call them nowadays."

"Do you know him?"

"Only by his reputation; but that's good enough—or bad enough, which means the same thing for us. I know his place, too, and the easiest way to reach it."

"He must have been going on to San Miguel. When will we find him at home?"

"Any time after to-day, he says, and we will light down on him to-morrow. I told you, Ben, that there were plenty of chances in these parts for men of our caliber, and we've struck what promises to be a good one already."

"I hope it won't cost us our scalps."

"Big risk means big pay."

"All right, Dick. We'll pick it up to-morrow."

CHAPTER III.

THE CATTLE BARON.

On a high that overlooked an extensive range was the house that appertained to a big cattle-ranch, one of those that require for the sustenance of their horned thousands a vast amount of pasturage.

As the herds increase, more pasturage is wanted, and it is acquired or occupied in one way or another, with precious little regard to the rights or claims of those who own the land or happen to be in possession of it.

Such was the ranch of Jack Koopman, and the house from which it was dominated, though comfortable enough, was quite unpretentious, and had in no respect the appearance of a stronghold.

Yet it was the castle of a cattle baron whose business represented a large amount of capital, and whose cattle were almost countless.

On the porch or veranda sat Jack Koopman, the proprietor, the same man who had occupied a seat in the San Miguel stage when it was so unprofitably "held up," and who left a note in his wallet for Col. Double-edge.

The burly cattle baron sat in a broad, hide-bottomed arm-chair, and at his elbow was a small table with bottles and glasses on it.

Before him stood a stalwart cowboy, his face shaded by a broad sombrero, and his spurs jingling as he stepped, who had just dismounted from a horse which he had not taken the trouble to hitch.

"Take a drink, Gabe," said Koopman. "There's the whisky. Help yourself."

The cowboy needed no persuasion, but poured out a glass brimming full of the amber liquid, which he tossed down his throat with a simple "Here's luck!"

"How's things, Gabe?" inquired the proprietor of the ranch.

"Purty much the same, Cap."

"Have you been down into the Gonzalez valley again?"

"Yes; me and Bill Hines started early this mornin' and took a run down thar."

"How about that sneaking squatter who is trying to start a sheep farm down there? Does he give any sign of being willing to break up and clear out?"

"Not a bit of it. He's as stubborn as any mule that ever got his tail twisted for ornariness. He drove our cattle off the range, fixed up his wire fence whar we'd cut it, and when we went to cut it ag'in, he had the consumed cheek to come and order us off."

"Confound his impudence! What did he say?"

"He said that he owned the land, and that he'd blow a hole through the fust man who started to cut the wire. We allowed that mebbe he mought have the law on his side, and we didn't have no orders to go further, and so we came away."

"That's right, Gabe. I don't want any of you boys to run into anything of that sort without my express orders, and I know that when you get them you'll go your length."

"Jest so, Cap. We only want you to back us up."

"You may depend on me for that. Law or no law, I've got to have that range. Without it I might as well pull up stakes and emigrate."

"It looks to me, Cap, as if you'll have to make a clearance of that cuss by wipin' him out."

"If there is no easier way, that is the game I mean to play; but I want to do it without bringing any of my own boys within the possible reach of the law."

"Don't see, then, how the scheme kin be made to work," declared Gabe.

"I mean to get somebody else to work it. I know a man who will be likely to do the job for me."

"Who's that?"

"Col. Double-edge, or Devil Dick, as some call him."

"The road-agent who has been makin' it lively fur the Gonzalez and San Miguel people?"

"That's the man."

"Jest the cuss fur the job, and he'll be willin' to do it, I reckon, fur good pay, and purvided you kin git holt of him."

"I have already seen him and made him an offer, and am expecting him here to-day with his partner."

"Thar they come, then. Leastways, I see a couple o' men ridin' up the slope, and I know they don't belong here."

Jack Koopman stood up to get a better look at the approaching horsemen.

"Those are my chaps," said he, "and they seem to have been ready enough to bite at the bait I offered. You may slide off now, Gabe, as I will want to speak to them alone."

The cowboy gracefully retired, and in a few minutes the two horsemen rode up to the house.

They were at once recognized by Jack Koopman as the bandits who had "held up" the San Miguel stage the day before, and he requested them to alight and come in.

As they walked up to the veranda, he noted with pleasure the appearance of the two, especially that of the larger and elder man, who seemed to be exactly the person for a difficult or desperate enterprise.

He offered them chairs, and Col. Double-edge seated himself where he could look the cattle baron full in the face.

"This is Mr. Jack Koopman, I suppose," observed the bandit.

"Yes, colonel, and I am glad to see you."

"You knew me, it seems, when we met yesterday; but maybe you didn't know my partner here. His name is Ben Hillman."

"Glad to know Mr. Hillman, and hope I will know both of you better before we are through with each other."

Koopman shook hands with the partners, and offered them liquor, of which they partook gladly and freely.

"Help yourselves to the cigars," said he, "and before long we will have something to eat out here; but we will have plenty of time, I think, to talk business before dinner comes on."

"Business is what we came for," remarked Col. Double-edge as he lighted a cigar, "and we are ready to talk business straight along."

"That suits me. By the way, colonel, is your name really Double-edge? A young man in the stage yesterday told me that you were also known as Devil Dick."

"That cheeky young chap with no cash, I reckon, who said that his firm never allowed him to collect any bills. Sensible firm that. Well, Mr. Koopman, either Col. Double-edge or Devil Dick is a good enough name for me to die in my boots with; but my sure enough name is Dick March, and you may call me that if you care to."

"Thank you. It suits me better than either of the others. And now for business. I am glad you took my note as it was meant, and that you came to see me so soon."

"Here we are, as you perceive. My partner was afraid that it might be a trick of some of the Gonzalez folks to trap us; but I had heard more or less about you, and I told him that you warn't that kind of a man."

"You were right. It was just as my note informed you, Dick March. I had heard of you, but did not know how to get at you, and made a trip in that stage with the hope of meeting you. Fortune favored me, and now you are here, and I will explain the business to you."

"Is it important?" inquired the bandit.

"Quite important, to me."

"Rather rough?"

"Rather rough, as you say; but the pay will be something that you won't be likely to grumble at."

"That's the main thing. Give us the business, plain and straight, so that we can know exactly what you mean and want."

"You will always find me up and up, my friend. Help yourselves to the whisky, gentlemen, and I will join you."

The throats of the party having been duly moistened, Jack Koopman proceeded with his explanation.

"I have a big ranch here, gentlemen, as you may have heard, and lots of cattle. I require for them plenty of room, and must have it."

"And if anybody gets in your way, he had better get out of it," suggested the bandit.

"Just so, and somebody has got in my way pretty badly. A man from somewhere in the States, named Throop—Tom Throop, I believe—has lately squatted in the Gonzalez valley on part of my range."

"Just a squatter?" inquired Dick March.

"I believe he makes some kind of a claim under a land-warrant, or something in that way; but I can't bother with such foolishness. The fact is, that he has not only squatted on the best part of the range that I have been using for more than three years, but has fenced it in, and has shut my cattle out from access to water just where I want them to have it. You know that water is a scarce article in this region."

"Scarcer than whisky," observed the colonel, as he tilted a bottle and filled his glass.

"Help yourself to the cigars. That squatter has taken it into his thick head to be stubborn, and can neither be bought out nor scared off."

"Perhaps you haven't offered him a big enough pile, or a strong enough scare."

"I have gone as far as I mean to go with him in the money line, and I am inclined to believe that something more than a scare will be required to rid me of him. My boys have gone down there and cut his fence and turned my cattle on the range; but he has turned them off and mended the fence, and this morning he told the boys that he would shoot the first man who

tried to cut it again. The fact is, colonel, that I think it best just now for me and my hands to go a little slow in such a matter as that."

"And so you want to get some help?"

"And so I want to get some help—somebody who is willing and able to go fast. I must clear that squatter off that ranch, and I doubt if he will leave it alive."

"And you don't care if he dies suddenly?"

"Nothing would please me better just now than to hear of his death."

"That is business, right up to the handle—supposing, of course, that I am to be the man to read his death-warrant to him. What sort of a ranch has he down there, Mr. Koopman?"

"A sheep farm of small account. It is a shame that such a trifling matter as that should stand in the way of me and my cattle."

"An infernal shame. What force or help has he on the ranch?"

"Two or three herders, and a boy to help about the house."

"Easy enough to get away with that outfit."

"His force won't bother you in the least, if you undertake the job. I will send some of my boys down there with you to cut the fence and drive off the sheep, and if any of his herders are about, and one or two of them should happen to get hurt, there will be no harm in that. I would prefer that a clean sweep should be made of the whole business. As for that man Throop, he must go under, anyhow."

"I suppose I understand you, Mr. Koopman?"

"You ought to, as I speak plainly enough. But that is not all. When I speak of a clean sweep, I also mean that the ranch buildings must go. Fire must sweep them away and wipe out the ranch. You will understand, Dick March, that I want to make an example of that squatter, and teach a lesson to all his sort."

"I do understand you, Mr. Koopman. It don't seem to be a difficult contract; but, in the view of the law, which is now and then heard of in these parts, it is a pretty tough one. However, I and my partner are willing to undertake it, if you can make it a paying business for us. What's the figure?"

The cattle baron named a sum which made the bandit open his eyes.

The sum was so large as to force Dick March to suspect that the entire truth had not been told him; that there were some points of difficulty or danger which had not been disclosed.

"It's a big figure," he observed. "Why don't you put some of your own men on it, and save all that money?"

"Simply because I want to have the job done by somebody who is a stranger here—somebody who can light out when it is finished. Whoever does it will have to leave this part of the country, and I want to offer enough to pay him to get out of the way and hold his tongue. That's all there is about it, and you needn't be afraid that I am keeping anything back, as I have given you the whole business, straight and square."

"I believe you, Mr. Koopman, and my partner and I will be willing enough to go away, as we are disgusted with this part of creation. What do you say, Ben? Shall we take the job?"

"I'm agreeable," answered the little man.

So this plan of murder and arson was settled as calmly and cold-bloodedly as if it had been nothing more than a bargain for the purchase of a few cattle.

"Help yourself to the whisky, gentlemen," said Jack Koopman. "I will go and see if dinner is ready."

CHAPTER IV.

THE RANCH IN THE WAY.

NEAR the upper end of the Gonzalez valley was a queer collection of sheds, which aroused the attention and excited the curiosity of occasional but infrequent passers-by.

Nothing could be more evident than the fact that the congeries of sheds was not intended for the purposes of any kind of a ranch that had yet been known in that region.

Shortly after they had been erected, however, their character and object became known at Gonzalez and along the valley, chiefly because the proprietor was not averse to telling all about them, not only to all who cared to ask, but to those who did not apply to him for information.

He was a circus man, small but wiry in his build, and active with his limbs and his tongue, and his name was Jephtha Jones.

His show had gone to pieces in that region, the collapse being partly due to a lack of paying patronage, and partly to the fault of his partner, who had decamped with the few funds remaining in the concern, taking with him also the star equestrienne who had been the main attraction of the circus.

Thus thrown upon his beam-ends, Jephtha Jones set at work to make the best he could of the situation, with the view of saving as much as possible of the vessel and cargo.

Being born with a hopeful disposition and plenty of pluck, he determined to keep his odds and ends together, believing that his reputation as a showman would enable him to secure capital enough to give him a fair start when another season should open.

Therefore he sold off a portion of his stock, husbanded the proceeds, and settled upon the Gonzalez valley as the most available location for spending the winter and keeping the remainder of his stock in order for the next campaign.

His nearest neighbor—in fact the only neighbor within a long distance—was a man named Tom Throop, who had started a sheep farm a few miles below the circus sheds.

Jephtha Jones soon made the acquaintance of this neighbor, and found him a hearty, good-natured, companionable man of middle age, who was always ready for a sociable chat when he could permit himself to take a little time from his work.

He was a very hard worker, however, and with a most laudable object.

He confided his affairs to the circus man pretty freely, informing him that he had left his son and daughter in Tennessee, where he had met with some financial disaster, and had come to that distant region for the purpose of taking a fresh start and making a new home for them.

The work that he had done since he settled in the Gonzalez valley was surprising to Jephtha Jones, considering the small amount of help he had employed.

Tom Throop was very well satisfied with it, himself, but kept pegging away, as he was anxious to put his place in as good order as possible before the arrival of his children.

He had already sent for them, he said, and believed that they were then on their way.

This was joyful news to the circus man, who was fond of the society of young people, and he congratulated his neighbor and encouraged him to continue his work.

But there was trouble in store for Tom Throop, and it came upon him in a severe and unexpected shape.

It would not have been unexpected if he had gone about and posted himself concerning the region in which he had settled and the people who might be considered his neighbors.

But he had stuck so closely to his work on the ranch, in his anxiety to have a pleasant home prepared for his children as soon as possible, that he had given himself no time for gadding about.

It is true that he had heard of Jack Koopman, the cattle baron who owned the earth, or fancied that he did; but he believed his land to be under the protection of the Government, and had as yet gained no experience of the brutal and overbearing ways of the Lords of the Range.

When that experience began to come to him, through the cutting of his fences and the driving of cattle upon the land he had inclosed, it roused his wrath without touching his fear.

He was strong in the determination of standing by his own and insisting upon his rights, even if he should perish in their defense.

When Koopman sent a messenger to him with a proposition that he should "clear out," offering him a sum that would not have half-paid for his improvements, he treated the message and the messenger with scorn, and boldly avowed his intention of staying right there, in spite of Jack Koopman or any other man or set of men!

These persecutions began shortly after he made the acquaintance of Jephtha Jones, and that friendly neighbor was duly informed of them and of all the transactions and negotiations in connection with them.

The circus man, who was better acquainted with the country and the people than the ranchman was, gave the latter some useful information concerning Jack Koopman and the style of cattle barons in general.

His facts were calculated to further rouse the indignation of Tom Throop, but did not move him an inch from his purpose of staying right there and sticking to his property.

"I see that your mind is made up," said Jones, "and that you don't want any of my advice. Indeed, I doubt if I could give any that would be satisfactory to myself, much less to you. I am afraid, though, that you are going to have a rough deal if you stay here."

"I shall stay right here and take it, whatever it may be," answered Throop. "It must be a strange country where a man can be robbed of his property, and perhaps of his life, without any protection or redress. It seems to me that the Government ought to look out for the people who settle on Government lands."

"There's something in that, Mr. Throop, and if you will allow me to, I mean to see what can be done about it. There is a small Government post at Gonzalez now, as I suppose you know. I am going down there to-morrow, and I will make it a point to see the officer in command and tell him about the trouble you are having here."

"You are very kind, Mr. Jones, and you will put me under great obligations by doing so. Will you stop here as you come back, and give me the result of your inquiry?"

The circus man promised that he would, and returned to his sheds, considerably troubled in mind, but for his neighbor rather than for himself.

He explained the situation to his chief assistant, an Americanized German, and expressed the opinion that Tom Throop was likely to have a "right down hard time of it."

"We are not so very safe here, Herman, either," said he; "but it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. If the worst comes, the ranch down there will act as a sort of buffer for us, and we will at least have ample warning to clear out. For my part, I would rather pull up stakes and quit, than find myself with a fight on my hands. But I am only a transient sort of a cuss, anyhow."

The next day Jephtha Jones rode down to Gonzalez.

After attending to some matters of business, he went out to the military post, where he learned that the officer in charge was about on duty; with most of his men.

No satisfactory information was to be gained in that quarter, and he returned to Gonzalez.

He had some acquaintances there, with whom he conversed concerning Tom Throop and his affairs, speaking of the persecution to which the ranchman had already been subjected, and of the trouble which he reasonably apprehended.

The only consolation he got was the advice to await the return of Lieut. Cripps, the commander of the military detachment.

"That is the only thing to do," said Ben Sellow, a merchant with whom the circus man had dealings.

"Pretty cold comfort," observed Jones.

"True enough; but there is nobody else who will take the matter up, and I doubt if the officer will. The best thing for your friend to do, in my opinion, is to give in and clear out."

"That's rough on the poor settler."

"What can he do? Nothing, unless he should get together a good fighting force, big enough to defend his ranch against all attacks, and that, I suppose is out of the question. It would be cheaper to give up and sell out. I tell you, Mr. Jones, those cattle kings are getting to be the curse of the earth in these parts. When such a man as Jack Koopman gets a grip on the country, there's no shaking it off, and everybody has to bow down before him."

"He can raise a regiment, I suppose, if he wants to," suggested Jones.

"Well, he has a big crowd of cowboys, the roughest and toughest lot that can be picked up anywhere, too. But he don't need to depend on them for his dirty work, as it is always easy to hire outlaws for that purpose. It has been hinted to me lately, and I get it from a pretty reliable source, that Jack Koopman has made a deal with a desperado who is known as Devil Dick."

"Seems to me that I have heard of him."

"Of course you have, if you have been about and kept your ears open. He is a noted stage-robber, and is always ready for any kind of desperate work."

"That makes matters look worse for my friend Throop."

"I am afraid so. Like enough the deal is intended for his benefit, and Devil Dick, who is also known as Col. Double-edge, would as lief murder a man as shoot a sheep for his dinner."

"Confound Col. Double-edge! I'd like to furnish a double-twisted rope and assist at the hanging of him."

As Jephtha Jones spoke in a loud tone, this remark attracted the attention of a man who after saying a parting word to somebody inside had just stepped out of an adjoining saloon.

He was a tall and large-framed man, swarthy and bearded, whose form and commanding air would make him a noticeable person anywhere.

As Jones finished speaking, this man turned slightly, raised a little the broad sombrero that had shaded his strong features, and stared at the speaker.

The circus man's face flushed under that cool and insolent stare; but he returned it unflinchingly.

Not a word was spoken by either, and the tall man, as if satisfied with his inspection of the little man, turned and walked away.

"That man will be likely to know me when he sees me again," observed Jones. "I am sure that I will know him. Who is he, Mr. Sellow?"

"I don't know. A stranger in Gonzalez, I should say, as I don't remember seeing him before."

You would have been likely to remember him if you had seen him, as that style of man is not easily forgotten. He looked at me as if he might be the redoubtable Col. Double-edge himself, ready to snap my head off for what I had said about him."

The tall starrer walked down the street to a horse that was hitched there, and leisurely unhitched and mounted it.

As he slowly rode away, a man came running to where Jephtha Jones was standing with his friend.

"Do you know that man who just passed you?" this third person demanded.

"No," answered Ben Sellow. "Who is he?"

"Devil Dick, the stage-robber."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I ought to be, as I was in a stage that he stopped not long ago."

"Run and tell the sheriff, and I will get some men to hunt him."

But Col. Double-edge had put spurs to his horse, and was soon out of sight, and the best men in Gonzalez could not have caught him if they had made the attempt.

Jephtha Jones sadly rode home, stopping at Tom Throop's ranch on the way, to report the failure of his mission.

CHAPTER V.

WIPING OUT THE RANCH.

COL. DOUBLE-EDGE and his partner lived in clover at the Koopman Ranch.

After the bargain with the cattle baron had been clinched, and while they were waiting to strike the blow, they were the guests of their employer, and had nothing to do but to eat and drink and sleep.

As the food and liquor and cigars were the best that could be procured in that region, they enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content, slept as soundly as if they had the consciences of cherubs, and agreed with each other that that style of thing was vastly better than highway-men's work with poor pickings and scanty fare.

They were also of the opinion that they were in no hurry to carry out the Koopman contract, as its conclusion would compel them to abandon their pleasant quarters and seek more sterile fields and scanty pastures.

One of them, however, was not entirely idle.

Col. Double-edge had meant what he said when he told his partner that he could go to Gonzalez and sell the valuable watch which formed the greater part of their recent spoils.

When he was sufficiently saturated with Jack Koopman's whisky, he proposed to make good his boast by taking a trip to Gonzalez, and he started to do so, in spite of the remonstrances of his partner.

It is probable that the cattle baron would also have remonstrated, if he had been informed in time of the intention of his henchman; but he was off on the range, and knew nothing about it until Col. Double-edge was far on his way to Gonzalez.

In due course of time the bandit returned, perhaps a little the worse for liquor, but abundantly able to take care of himself.

"Well, Ben, I've made the rifle!" he triumphantly exclaimed.

"If I had known that you were going to Gonzalez, I might have entered an objection," observed Koopman.

"Why so? It wasn't in the contract that I should stay at any place in particular."

"I don't think you ought to run any such risks."

"That's my lookout, I reckon, and there was no risk in it to speak of, just as I told my partner. I sold that watch, Ben, and got a decent price for it, and didn't have a speck of trouble of any kind."

"I would have supposed that somebody there might have recognized you," remarked Ben.

"If somebody did, that somebody was careful not to squeal or make any sign. The nearest I came to having what you might call an adventure was just as I was ready to skip the burgh."

"What happened then?"

"I heard my name mentioned in the street there by a dried-up little cuss who coupled it with the remark that he would like to help hang me. Thinking it possible that he knew the man he was talking about, I stopped and gave him a good looking over, so that he might have a chance to go a bit further if he wanted to."

"Did he know you?"

"Reckon not. If he did, he was careful to keep his knowledge to himself. If he had made a move or a murmur, I think I would have let daylight through his carcass as he stood there."

"I am glad that you were not provoked into doing anything of the sort," remarked Jack Koopman, "and I am sorry that you went to Gonzalez, but hope no harm has been done. You won't have a chance to run such another risk while you are here, as my job is to be done to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" queried the bandit.

"To-morrow morning early you will start from here to wipe out that ranch, and I shall expect you to make a clean sweep of it. I would suggest that you had better touch the whisky lightly from now on, as you will need to have a clear head for that work."

As the employer ordered, so it was done.

Before daybreak the next morning, a party of five men set out from Jack Koopman's ranch.

It was composed of Col. Double-edge, Ben Hillman, and three stalwart and active cowboys, and all were admirably mounted and fully armed.

Before the start, they received from the cattle baron instructions that were brief and to the point.

"I want you to understand, Dick March," said he, "that if anybody shows fight, you and your partner are to do the fighting."

"Suppose the other side should prove to be too many for us?" inquired Col. Double-edge.

"That is not a bit likely. In case it should happen, my boys will help you; but I want them to keep out of the scrape unless they are forced

into it. All they have to do is to cut the fence and drive off the sheep, and the rest is your business. Don't forget the fire!"

"All right, boss. You may bet your last dollar that we will give a good account of ourselves."

The party took the shortest route to the Gonzalez valley, and rode down the valley at a good speed until they came in sight of Tom Throop's ranch.

Then Gabe Cross, who was the leader of the cowboys, halted on an elevated position to explain the situation to what may be styled the military contingent of the expedition.

He pointed out Tom Throop's little house and its few outbuildings, and showed his allies the location of the fence and the point of attack.

Sheep were visible from the point of view, and near them were two herders.

As it was deemed best to make the approach as secretly as possible, Gabe Cross led the party further down the slope of the valley, so that their progress might be screened from the herders by a rocky elevation, partly covered with trees, that intervened between them and the little ranch.

"You kin see, colonel," observed Gabe as they rode on, "how the ranch down thar hurts the old man. He's been usin' all this range, and now that squatter has closed in the best of it and cut our cattle off from the water."

"We will soon make an end of that," said Col. Double-edge.

The party kept well out of sight of Tom Throop's herders, and came to his wire fence just as they passed beyond the screen that had shielded them from observation.

The cowboys quickly cut the wires of the fence, and the five men passed into the inclosure.

"Now for business!" said Col. Double-edge as he took his rifle in his right hand. "You go for the sheep, and we will go for the herders. Are you ready?"

"All ready."

"Go!"

All five put spurs to their horses, and down the slope they went at a furious and headlong gallop.

The hurrying hoofs made no noise on the soft turf they tore up; but the presence and purpose of the raiders were speedily made manifest by the action of the sheep.

Those timid creatures, either by the sense of hearing or by that of smell, took the alarm at once, and began to scurry away toward the west at their best speed.

The two herders caught the alarm from the sheep, though they could not at first be sure what was the matter, and ran for their horses, which had been hitched near by while they rested in the shade.

After the sheep galloped the three cowboys, and after the herders went Col. Double-edge and his partner at a furious pace.

At first the herders had started to follow the sheep, but their backward glances soon showed them the murderous nature of the pursuit, and it was necessary that they should do their best to care for their own safety.

Instantly they changed their course to the right, and headed for the rocky ground that has been mentioned, doubtless hoping to secure cover and evade their pursuers.

They may have supposed that the object of the raid was to drive off the sheep, and they surely did not know what manner of men were on their track.

As they turned in among the rocks the two bandits lost them for a moment; but their rapid riding soon brought them again in sight of their intended victims.

"Shoot 'em down, Ben!" yelled Col. Double-edge.

His rifle cracked as he spoke, and Ben Hillman hastened to follow the example set by his leader.

One of the unfortunate herders reeled in his saddle and dropped heavily to the ground, while his horse bounded wildly away.

The other horse, which had been struck by Ben Hillman's shot, stumbled and fell, catching his rider under his side and pinning him to the ground.

As the man struggled to extricate himself, Col. Double-edge came riding up, intent on putting the finishing touches to this act of the bloody tragedy.

It was soon over then.

Reining up his horse, the merciless bandit drew a revolver and, in deadly answer to the pleadings of the poor fellow, sent two bullets crashing through his head.

Again spurring forward, he changed his course, and galloped toward Tom Throop's house, closely followed by his partner.

As he approached it he met Gabe Cross.

"The squatter's skipped out, colonel," said the cowboy.

"What has become of him?"

"Look over thar!"

Gabe Cross pointed westward, toward a gap in the hills there, in the direction of which a man and a boy were hastening on foot.

"You'll find 'em corraled in that hole, colonel," he said, "and it'll be easy work thar.

Never mind anythin' else. We'll look arter the fire!"

"Come on, Ben!" ordered Col. Double-edge, and again he spurred his horse as he started in pursuit of the fugitives.

It was no difficult matter to overtake them, as they were seen to enter the gap, and two swift horses could easily run down two people on foot.

As the bandits rode into the gap Col. Double-edge perceived that Gabe Cross had spoken truly when he said that the fugitives would be corraled there.

They had gone into a glen from which the entrance was the only exit, and one of them—the squatter whose death was especially desired—was in plain sight there near the upper end of the hole.

The leading bandit dashed on, throwing up his rifle and firing as he went.

The shot told, as his shots usually did, and Tom Throop tumbled over.

He was not killed at once, but was so badly wounded as to be incapable of making any resistance when Col. Double-edge rode up to where he lay.

There was no mercy in the bandit's face, and the wounded man did not ask for any.

Again the deadly revolver was drawn out, and two bullets were fired into the helpless body, and there was an end of Tom Throop's earthly labors and hopes.

Col. Double-edge and his partner left him there, and sought vainly in and about the glen for the other fugitive.

"I am sure," said the slayer, "that some sort of a nigger ran in here; but he must have melted away."

"He's no account, anyhow," suggested Ben Hillman, and they hastened to rejoin their comrades.

The cowboys had finished the rest of the work by setting fire to the house and out-buildings, and by cutting the wire fence in several places.

As there was nothing more to be done, the victorious party proudly returned to Jack Koopman's ranch and reported to its proprietor.

He paid Dick March the price agreed on for himself and his partner, and advised them to quit the country.

"Not that I think there would be any real danger for you here," he said; "but that was part of the bargain, and I would rather have you out of the way."

CHAPTER VI.

THE CIRCUS MAN HAS ENOUGH.

A CONSIDERABLE portion of the tragedy that has been described was witnessed by Jephtha Jones.

The day after his return from Gonzalez he was more than usually anxious about his friend Tom Throop, and started down the valley to visit him.

As the land upon which he had temporarily settled bordered on the Throop Ranch, his feeling for his neighbor was naturally coupled with some anxiety concerning his own interests.

He had found Tom Throop so stubborn, so obstinately determined to stay there and "stick it out," that there could be no reasonable hope for the future of the settler and his ranch.

It was important, however, that the circus man should keep himself informed of what had happened there, as it might be expected that his turn would come when the encroaching cattle baron had got through with Tom Throop.

He went afoot, as it was not far from his sheds to Throop's house, and there were some bits of ground on the range he used which he wished to examine on the way.

He had reached a piece of broken and rocky ground, and was about to turn to the right to pass around it, when he was startled by a shout.

At the same time he caught sight of five men who looked like cowboys, galloping furiously down the slope in the direction of the house.

Two of Throop's herders were riding toward the rocky ground, and two of the five raiders changed their course and rode after them.

Jephtha Jones could easily guess what had happened and what was about to happen.

The blow had fallen, and Tom Throop and his ranch were doomed.

For himself the question of the moment was that of his personal safety, and he was glad that he happened to be where he could hide from the pursuit of the raiders, as he would be as likely to become a victim as anybody if he should be in their path.

He hastened to ensconce himself in a hole in the rock, where he would be invisible, and at the same time could see something of what went on about him.

What he saw was enough to chill the blood in his veins.

As the two herders, nearly frightened out of their wits, came riding past his hiding-place, two shots were fired.

One of them dropped dead, and the other fell under his wounded horse.

Then came the pursuers at a gallop, and one of them, reining up, fired two shots into the man who was struggling to extricate himself.

Jephtha Jones had a plain view of the murderer

as he fired, and easily recognized the tall and dark man who had stared at him so insolently in Gonzalez, and who, as he had then been informed, was the notorious stage-robber, Col. Double-edge.

One sight of that malignant and merciless face was enough for the circus man.

He snuggled down in his hiding-place, squeezing himself into as small a compass as possible, and praying only that he might by no chance become visible to those murderous desperadoes.

They saw nothing of him, not suspecting his presence there, and, to his great relief, they rode away.

When they had passed out of his sight and hearing, it was some time before he ventured to crawl forth from his concealment and peer about.

Then a bright light attracted his attention, and looking down toward Tom Throop's place, he saw the house and outbuildings in flames.

The main part of the story was told—the remainder he could guess at.

Shortly he saw the five raiders together riding back up the slope, and he hastened to hide himself again, lest they should catch sight of him.

When he was satisfied that they were well out of the way, he left the rocks, and went down to where Tom Throop's buildings had stood.

Nothing was left of them but ashes and smoldering ruins, from which still rose a little flame and much smoke.

He walked about there, looking for his late neighbor, but saw nothing of him or any other person.

It was highly improbable that Tom Throop had escaped, and it was quite certain that he was nowhere near his burned home.

Having satisfied himself on this point, Jeptha Jones hastened home and consulted with his chief assistant, who was both horrified and frightened when he was informed of the occurrences of the day.

"What are you going to do about it, Mr. Jones?" inquired Herman.

"I don't mean to take any risks that I can avoid, and so I shall go to the man who is responsible for this business, and ask him if I am in his way. If he says that he wants me to clear out, I shall just git up and git."

"You had better be careful how you fool with that sort of a man."

"There won't be any fooling on my part. I shall knuckle right down every time, as long as I am sure that I can't help myself."

The next morning the circus man, who was as quick to act as to think, mounted his horse, and rode up to Jack Koopman's ranch.

He found the cattle baron at home, and soon succeeded in coming to an understanding with him, though he felt his way rather carefully at first.

He saw nothing of Col. Double-edge or his partner about the premises, and was glad of that, as he was not at all anxious to gain the intimate acquaintance of either of those gentlemen.

They had, in fact, obeyed the instructions of their employer and taken themselves out of the way.

Jeptha Jones made his appearance in the character of a man seeking advice.

He spoke to Mr. Koopman of his circus which had come to an untimely end, and explained his intention of remaining in that vicinity for some time, with the view of reorganizing his show and starting in on the road again.

"I don't know but I have made a botch of it, though," said he. "Indeed, I had a hint to that effect in Gonzalez lately."

"How so?" inquired Koopman.

"I settled on the first likely bit of ground I came across, and it may be that I have run up my sheds and taken a range for my stock on land that is owned or used by somebody else."

"Where are you settled?" asked the cattle baron, though he did not really need any information on that point.

The circus man explained his location as well as he could without making any mention of Tom Throop or his ranch, and described it clearly enough to a man who already knew all about it.

"That is part of my range," mildly observed Koopman; "but I don't know that you would be in my way there, unless you should fence in the land. However, there are some lawless characters about, and, if you want my honest advice, I will give it to you."

"I will be greatly obliged to you, Mr. Koopman, if you will tell me plainly just what you think I had better do."

"It is my opinion, then, that if you want to be safe and clear of any sort of trouble, you had better pull up stakes and move away from the Gonzalez valley—say to the other side of the hills. If you should conclude to do anything of the kind, and should need help, I will cheerfully lend you some of my men and teams."

"Thank you, Mr. Koopman. Your offer is kindly made, and I will gladly accept it."

The circus man did not accept it, however, but used his own people, and quietly got up and dusted with the least possible delay.

As he accompanied the last load from his re-

cent location, he turned and looked sadly at Tom Throop's ruined ranch.

"Talk about Comanches and Apaches!" he exclaimed bitterly. "It is my opinion that some white men are worse than any savages that ever lived. If I could be the Governor of this Territory, I would offer a big reward for the scalps of more than one of them, and especially for the scalp of that murderous scoundrel, Col. Double-edge!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE MARSHAL OF SANDSTONE.

It was high noon in Sandstone.

For the information of the reader it may be as well to remark that there was always two noons in that fresh and lively Texas town.

The first occurred at midday, when the heat of the sun was almost unendurable, when no business worth speaking of was being done, when the only persons visible were a few loafers under the awnings, and when even the sandflies were supposed to be asleep.

That was a very quiet noon, which nobody cared for.

The other occurred at midnight, when all the motley population that had been attracted thither by the building of the railroad gathered in Sandstone to enjoy the excitement of the saloons and gambling houses and other schemes for the distribution of dollars.

That was the real high noon, when life in Sandstone was at the top of the flood, when both sides of the street were brilliantly lighted, and when a carnival of gayety and roistering prevailed, emphasized rather than interrupted now and then by what John Phoenix styled "the soft note of the pistol and the pleasant screech of the victim."

One of the most attractive of the places of resort was Sam Sholes's "Onward" Saloon, as it was the biggest and showiest of the poison-shops of Sandstone.

It was well filled at the hour that has been mentioned by a motley collection of humanity from railroad engineers and cattle-owners to laborers and cowboys.

All were on a footing of absolute equality, and all fraternized and enjoyed themselves together.

Most of them were jolly and noisy; but the jolliest and noisiest was a man at one end of the bar, who was busily employed in "irrigating himself" with the liquid that inebriates.

This man, though small and of light build, was of peculiar appearance.

He was neither young nor old, though the lines in his smooth-shaven face were such as are supposed to come with years, and his complexion had nothing like the freshness of youth.

There was a peculiarly wide-awake expression in his small, reddish-brown eyes, which exactly matched in color his close-cropped hair.

Though a lightweight, there was that in his supple and wiry form and in his quick and nervous actions that might have caused a belligerent stranger to be careful how he "tackled" him.

He wore a peculiar blue jacket with silver buttons and bits of embroidery—resembling a portion of a Mexican costume; but more strongly suggesting a remnant of some theatrical outfit. Under it was a blue shirt, fancifully cut and embroidered.

But the rest of his attire "gave him away."

His trousers were of ordinary cut and cheap material, as were also his boots; and his slouch felt hat was such as a cowboy might have worn.

A man stood near him who was probably an intimate friend, as he occasionally cautioned the rapid drinker, advising him to slow up in the process of poisoning himself.

This man was a tall and athletic young fellow, surely under thirty, not so light a blonde as his companion, and somewhat more heavily sun-browned.

He differed from the little man in his attire as well as in his size, his clothes being of good material and make, though not unsuited to the place and time.

In all respects he had the appearance of a person quite able to take care of himself.

Though the little man took the suggestions of his friends in good part, he freely disregarded them, and proceeded to call for drinks vociferously.

"Set 'em up again!" he shouted to the bar-keeper. "All down on this alley! Come, boys, what'll you take?"

The "boys" were those who happened to be nearest to him, and they joined him readily.

His friend, who had not touched the glass that was placed before him, spoke a little impatiently after this round.

"Come, Jep, it is time to let up. If you keep on at this rate you will slop over pretty soon, and then you will be apt to fetch up in the calaboose. Suppose we quit for the night?"

The little man stepped closer to his friend, and addressed him in a lower tone than he had lately been using.

"You know me right well, Walter Brandis, and you know that I always give you the square truth. Let me tell you now that I know what I can carry, and that I can measure myself as easy as you can run a level over prairie land. I

can do it, and I will do it, so sure as my name is Jeptha Jones."

"I hope you will, Jep, and that you will strike the measure in time, for I can't stay here to look after you. I must go to the stage office, as I am expecting some friends."

"Trot along, then, my boy. You don't need to worry about me. I'm running this circus myself."

"Then take care of yourself, Jep," warned the other, as he turned away and left the saloon.

Though Jep Jones had boasted of his ability to "measure" himself, he acted as if he had forgotten the rule or did not care to apply it.

He treated again and again those who happened to be near him, and spent his money as freely as if he knew that there was plenty more where that came from.

After awhile he began to amuse himself and others by performing acrobatic antics such as are seldom seen outside of a circus tent.

His feats attracted a crowd that blocked up the space before the bar and seriously interfered with the movements of the performer.

Then a discussion arose concerning an act of balancing which he proposed to perform with the aid of a chair.

One of the bystanders declared that he could not do it, and he vehemently insisted that he could.

A bet closed the argument, and each of them deposited ten dollars in the hands of the bar-keeper to abide the result of the trial.

But Sam Sholes was of the opinion that the performance would interfere with the business of his establishment, and he pushed his way into the crowd.

"This sort of thing won't do," said he. "There's no room here for a circus show. Go outside to play your tricks, boys. You'll find a good enough chance there."

"All right," answered Jep Jones, as he picked up a chair and led the way out of the saloon.

The plank sidewalk in front of the "Onward" afforded an excellent opportunity for the performance, and a crowd quickly collected about the little man and the chair.

"Now, Sile, this thing is understood," said he, addressing his partner in the betting. "I am to balance myself by one hand on the back of the chair as it stands, with my legs straight up. Then I am to balance on two legs of the chair."

"Without getting down," interposed the other.

"Just so, and then on one leg. That's a square understanding. Give me a little more room, boys."

The crowd moved back a little, and the acrobat proceeded with his performance.

It was not a difficult feat that he had to do, and the man who bet against him was either ignorant of such matters, or laid too much stress on the upsetting qualities of Sam Sholes's whisky.

Jep Jones went up in the air with his legs close together, holding himself there easily by grasping the back of the chair.

It could be seen that his arm was like steel, and that there was not a quiver of a muscle.

After maintaining himself in this position for a few moments, he tilted the chair by an invisible movement so that it rested on the two hind legs, and there he balanced himself apparently as easily as before.

To balance upon one leg of the chair was not quite such an easy matter, and the acrobat first cast a glance downward to make sure that the leg on which he wished to operate was not near a crack of the sidewalk.

Having satisfied himself on this point, he set his muscles at work again, and the chair began to tilt sideways.

Just then there was a movement in the crowd which had been gradually approaching the performer, and a man who seemed to have been pushed forward, touched the chair.

The touch was a slight one, but sufficient to destroy the equilibrium of the performer and his support.

Down came the chair, and Jep Jones alighted on his feet.

But he was evidently in a rage as he stood there.

His spare form trembled with excitement, and his usually colorless face was red with passion.

His eyes shot out sparkles of fire as he sought the man who had bet against him.

"You did that, Sile Wurtz," he said as he faced the man.

"I didn't," was the prompt reply, but without as much indignation as might have been expected.

"You did, and it was a mean, dirty trick."

"I never touched the chair."

"But you pushed the man who *did* touch it."

"You're a liar!"

Sile Wurtz was a tall man, and his shoulder was as high as the top of the head of Jep Jones.

But the little man was all wire and fire, and his action was like lightning for quickness and force.

Hardly had the words left the lips of the big man when the little one sprang up and struck him, launching out that steely right arm like a shot from a rifle.

Sile Wurtz staggered under the blow, and his left eye went into mourning.

With a savage oath he jerked a big revolver from his belt.

But he was not as quick as his little antagonist, who had already produced a smaller weapon from some unknown portion of his apparel.

Click, click, went the cocks of both revolvers, and the crowd began to fall back.

Just in time to permit the passage of a man who forced his way through and placed himself between the belligerents.

The new-comer was a tall and stalwart fellow, splendidly formed, and with the air and mien of one who was born to be obeyed.

His raven-black hair matched his piercing black eyes, and his swarthy face was set off by a heavy black mustache.

The arsenal that he carried upon his person increased his formidable appearance.

At his waist were two heavy revolvers in plain sight, above them a belt of cartridges, and back of his right hip a bowie-knife in a sheath.

The crowd gazed at him with respect, if not with awe.

If any of them had thought of taking a hand in the impending fight, they speedily abandoned the intention.

Well they might, as the tall man who was so well equipped was no other than Jim Sartine, the redoubtable Marshal of Sandstone.

"Stop that!" was the marshal's stern command. "Keep the peace, or you'll go to pieces! I don't allow anybody but myself to fight in this town. What! have you been fighting? Who struck the first blow?"

Jep Jones was pointed out to him.

"Well, he's a hitter from Hitville. Come, my little man, you'll have to go to the calaboose with me."

Wurtz had quickly replaced his revolver, but the acrobat stood there, with his hand lowered to his side, but his pistol still cocked and ready for action.

He was staring at Jim Sartine with his eyes and mouth wide open, as if in wonder.

"Will you go quietly?" demanded the official, "or will I have to hurt you?"

"Yes, I will go with you," quietly answered Jep Jones, as he continued to stare earnestly at the marshal.

He put his pistol back in the recess from which he had taken it, and walked away by the side of Jim Sartine.

CHAPTER VIII.

"IT IS IMPOSSIBLE."

THE morning after his collision with Sile Wurtz Jeptha Jones was taken before the police magistrate of Sandstone, and was mulcted in a small fine for "disorderly conduct."

The fine was a little matter; but there proved to be a bill of costs attached that swelled the amount to a considerable sum.

It was thus that Sandstone paid its enterprising officials.

When Jep went down into his pockets he discovered that he was not possessed of sufficient lucre to settle the combined account against him.

So he sent for Walter Brandis, who came and paid the bill and took his friend out of pawn.

Then they went to the hotel at which Brandis was boarding, and on the way Jep stopped but once to try "a hair of the dog that bit him."

After breakfast they sought and found a quiet and shady place where they could smoke and converse without too much discomfort.

"It seems, then, old man, that Sam Sholes's whisky was too much for you, after all," observed Brandis. "You would have done better to take my advice when I told you that you would fetch up in the calaboose unless you went slow."

"It wasn't the whisky," answered Jeptha Jones. "It would have taken more than that to worry me. But Sile Wurtz played me a dirty and rascally trick, and when I let him know that I knew it he called me a liar. Of course I had to hit him."

"I suppose so; but if I had known that you were going to fight that telegraph pole, I would have brought you a stepladder to climb up on."

"Oh, I could get at him easy enough, Walter, and I only had to take care that he didn't tumble over on me."

"But you climbed down all of a sudden, as I have heard, when Jim Sartine took a hand in the game."

"I wasn't going to buck against the law, you know."

"That's right, Jep. But I have been wondering why it was that you told the marshal that you would go with him—just as if you would have refused to go with some other officer."

Jep's countenance changed, and he looked as if the question worried him.

"Well," he ventured to remark, "the man looked as if he was big enough to take me, and the easiest way was to give in."

"That won't do, Jep. Do you suppose I believe that his size counted with you? Do you want to play it off on me that you were scared?"

"No, Walter. I am willing to admit to you

that I wasn't scared, as I am sure you know that nothing of that kind was the matter with me. I was knocked cold by astonishment."

"By astonishment?" cried Brandis. "Now we are coming to it. I knew that there must be something out of the ordinary that could turn a wildcat into a lamb like that. What was it, then, that astonished you, Jep?"

The other frowned and fidgeted before he answered.

"I don't like to talk about it, Walter," said he. "I am almost a stranger in Sandstone, and must be careful what I do and say, so I don't want to get the people here down on me."

"But I am not one of the people here, Jep, and I am not likely to get down on you. You have excited my curiosity to such an extent that I insist upon knowing what was the matter with you."

Jep looked around, after the manner that is peculiar to the stage, to make sure that nobody was within hearing distance, and then he spoke almost in a whisper.

"As soon as I saw that marshal, Walter, it struck me like a shot that I had seen him before. When I looked at him again I was sure of it."

"Where had you seen him, then?"

"I don't care to tell you that just yet. Let me give it to you in my own way. When I was sure that I knew the man, I wanted to go somewhere right away—where I could think over things quietly—and the calaboose was the quietest place I knew of."

"As well as the hottest. Well, you thought it over there, and what came of your thinking?"

Jep Jones went into a brown study before he spoke again.

"Walter, who is that man who took me in?"

"Jim Sartine, Marshal of Sandstone, the best-known man about here."

"I knew that much, and I want to know more. Where did he come from?"

"That is more than I can tell you."

"How long has he been here?"

"There you've got me again. But I know that he has been acting as marshal something less than a year. He was elected last September in place of a man who had been killed in the discharge of his duties, and in January he was elected for a year. He has made a splendid marshal, too, and the town has quieted down amazingly since he has been in office, though plenty of roughs have been pouring in lately. The people of Sandstone just worship him."

"So I supposed, and that makes the business a ticklish one to talk about."

"What are you trying to get at, Jep Jones? You excite my curiosity more and more."

"Walter, does that Marshal of Sandstone ever go away from here—ever take vacations?"

"He took one, I remember; a vacation of about three weeks, covering part of May and June of this year."

"Ah!"

"What do you mean by your Ah? If you have got anything to say, why don't you say it? You say that you knew Sartine when you met him last night. Did he know you?"

"I am happy to say that the last time I saw him he did not see me. If he had, it is likely that I wouldn't be here now to tell you about it."

"About what, Jep? Will you never come to the point? What is it that you have to tell?"

"Walter, it was in the early part of last June when, as you tell me, the Marshal of Sandstone was on a vacation. How did he spend that vacation?"

"That is what I want you to tell me, if you know anything about it."

"I was up in Arizona then, Walter, with my last circus venture—Richfield & Jones's Enormous Aggregation of Consolidated Galaxies."

"Could you stuff all that into one Territory, Jep?"

"What's in a name, my boy? In that concern there was not much outside of a name, and not enough to make it a go. We had wintered and refitted in Arizona, and in the latter part of spring we started out with big paper and a small show."

"We had worried along for a few weeks when Jim Richfield skipped out with the cash there was in the army chest."

"He took his daughter with him, too, and, as she was our best card, I was badly left, and the show was busted wide open."

"I pulled down the tents and stored them, and sold enough horses and traps to pay salaries up to the close, and then I hung around there to take care of the remnants and realize what I could from them."

"I had heard a good deal of a stage-robber and thief and terror in general, known as Colonel Double-edge, who had made the country north and west of Tucson his stamping-ground for some time."

"He had not been about there for many months until the early part of June, when it was said that he had come back there, and that he had been hired by the cowboys and cattle-men to help drive off the sheep-herders and small ranchers."

"There was a queer and unpleasant condition

of affairs about there at the time, though I can't say that it was peculiar to that section of country."

"The cattle-men wanted the earth, as they always do, I believe, and the sheep-men and small people were in their way; so the big fish determined to swallow the little ones, and this Colonel Double-edge was employed by them to do the dirtiest of their dirty work."

"You may be sure that their cause was a bad one when they used such an instrument as that."

"Cutting of fences was the first move in the game, and then came the scattering of sheep, and then the bloody work began."

"I had been warned to beware of the colonel and his gang; but there was no chance for me to guard the ranch where I kept the odds and ends of my busted show."

"There was a wire-fence sheep-ranch just beyond me, and I thought it might act as a sort of a buffer for me."

"Anyhow, I would know when the sheep men were stampeded, and might have time to get out of harm's way."

"The turn of the sheep-ranch came a little sooner than I had expected it to, and I happened to be there and saw how the game was worked."

"The herders came running in, driving their sheep, and they told me that the fence had been cut and the raiders were after them."

"I started back to my ranch to look after my property, and was crossing a rocky piece of ground when I heard galloping and yelling."

"I hid among the rocks, and there I saw two herders riding near me at their best speed, and after them came five mounted men."

"Rifles cracked, and one of the herders fell from his horse, quite dead. The other was wounded, and he fell under his horse, which had been mortally shot."

"One of the pursuers reined up his horse near the wounded man, drew a revolver, and deliberately fired two bullets into the head of the poor fellow as he was trying to free himself from the struggling beast that held him down."

"I shall never forget the face of that cold-blooded murderer as long as I live."

"And that is all the story."

"It was a brutal and cowardly murder," remarked Walter Brandis. "No doubt of that. Who was the murderer, Jep?"

"Colonel Double-edge, the terror that I had been told of. I had met him before that, and got him down fine. He said Dick March was his true name."

"But what has that to do with the man who took you in last night?"

"Dick March, Col. Double-edge, the man who blew out the brains of that helpless herder, is Jim Sartine, the Marshal of Sandstone."

"It is impossible!" exclaimed Walter Brandis. "I supposed that you were coming to that point. Of course, Jep, I don't doubt your word, but, that is simply impossible!"

CHAPTER IX.

A TERRIBLE BLOW.

JEPHTHA JONES was not at all put out by his friend's decided expression of opinion, which surely did not in the slightest degree affect his own settled belief.

"Impossible!" he musingly remarked. "That is just what I expected you to say, Walter, and that is why I must be careful not to turn my tongue loose. If I had told the story to anybody else in Sandstone as I have told it to you, the least I could have looked for would have been a broken head. Quite likely the Sandstoners would have hung me off-hand. But I don't know why you, who are a sort of an outsider, should say that it is impossible!"

"Because Jim Sartine is not that kind of a man," promptly answered Brandis. "Because his entire character and career prove him to be no such a person as you describe."

"What do you know of his character and career, outside of Sandstone?"

"Nothing—that is, very little. I know that he served with the Rangers, and that he made a good record among them. But his record since he has been here is enough for any man to bank on. As a man and as an officer he has been a great success. Everybody knows him, and everybody says that a cleaner and squarer man never lived in these parts. It would be hot for anybody who should try to make the people of Sandstone believe that he was anything else."

"Just so. They have set him up as a little tin god on wheels."

"They worship him, that's a fact, and they have good cause to think well of him. He has done good work here, and has made a reputation that nothing short of a cyclone could knock over."

"As I don't pretend to be even a small blizzard, I shall not undertake the job. I shall not undertake to interfere with the worship of the Sandstoners, as I know where unbelievers may expect to go to. But I shall keep my opinion, my boy, between you and me, though I shall keep it to myself."

Walter Brandis was a little annoyed by the persistency or obstinacy of his friend.

"If Jim Sartine," said he, "had been the terror in Arizona that you describe him to have been, as Col. Double-edge, or Devil Dick, it is likely that some of his gang or somebody who had known him in that capacity, would have passed through here and would have informed against him."

"Not much, Walter."

"Why not?"

"How can you ask that? Because he is not the kind of man that people would want to inform against. He is enough of himself to make it hot for an informer, to say nothing of his position which gives him a big advantage, or of the Sandstone folks who back him so solidly. I am willing to bet high, Walter, that you don't take me for a man who can easily be scared; but I would be afraid to whisper what I have told you where anybody but you could hear it."

"But you may be mistaken, Jep?"

"Permit me to assure you most solidly, my boy, that there is no chance for a mistake. If I could have doubted his face, his voice would have settled the doubt. I went to see his employer, and told him that if my ranch was in his way I would skip out, and that I only wanted to know where to skip to. I got the right steer, and moved the odds and ends of the great show to a safe place. Before that, March was pointed out to me at Gonzalez, and I heard him talk. I am as sure as that I sit here that *Jim Sartine is the same man!* But, you won't catch me making any blow about it."

"That's right."

"I don't see, Walter, why there should be anything unreasonable in my belief. It would not be the first time, by a big majority, that a man has been known to lead a double life—to be one thing in one place, and something entirely different in another place. If I had put this man in two places at the same time, you would have a right to kick; but I saw him in Arizona when he was away from here. What is there that's impossible about it? Lots of people have said that my double-twisted somerset—the 'supreme,' as I call it—was impossible; but I always did it fair and square, and never failed to bring down the house."

"Suppose we drop the question," suggested Brandis. "I don't think we need argue it any more."

"All right. But there is one thing I want to tell you about that Dick March, whoever he may be."

"Hurry up, then. I am getting tired."

"Directly after he had killed those herdsmen, he hurried on to the ranch of the man who owned the sheep, and burned his house to the ground. It was a right nice house, too, and everything on the place was burned out. There can be no doubt that the ranchman was killed, too. He would have shown up if he had been alive; but nothing has since been seen of poor Tom Throop."

Walter Brandis, who had fallen into a musing mood, suddenly awoke to what his friend was saying.

"What's that?" he sharply demanded.

"I was saying that I supposed the ranchman was killed, as nothing was heard of him again."

"But what name did you give him?"

"Throop was his name—Tom Throop—a good man and well liked in the neighborhood. It was a sad business, too, as he had been trying to make a home for his family there, and had succeeded by hard work, and was expecting them to come on and join him when he and everything he had were swept away by that murderous villain."

"God in Heaven!" exclaimed Brandis. "Can that be true?"

"Of course it is true, or I wouldn't have told it to you. What is the matter, my boy? Did you happen to know the man?"

"Can it be the man I knew? That is what I mean. But it is. It must be. Jep, I did know Tom Throop, and his son and daughter were the people I was expecting last night when I went to the stage office."

"Did they come?"

"No; but I am looking for them at every stage. What a blow this will be to poor George and Etta!"

"Where are they coming from, Walter?"

"From Tennessee, where he left them at school when he came down here to try for a fortune."

"That's it. He was a Tennessee man. I have heard him say so."

"You have seen him, then, Jep?"

"Of course I have. He was my nearest neighbor, and he was a good friend to me. None of us out there knew where his people were, or we would have sent them some sort of word when we believed that he had been wiped out. He had no idea of dying, you see, as he was a strong and healthy man, and all was going well with him then."

"This will be a terrible blow to Etta and George, and I don't know how I am going to give it to them. I wish, Jep, that you would stay with me until the stage comes in. The morning wagon is about due now."

In the course of half an hour the heavy rum-

bling of the wheels of the stage was heard, and the two friends hastened to the front of the hotel.

The weary horses attached to the lumbering vehicle were glad enough to stop in the shade, and so were the tired and dusty passengers.

Among them were two who were instantly recognized by Walter Brandis.

One was a tall and manly young fellow of perhaps twenty one or two, and the other was a girl who might have been a year or so younger than he.

Worried as they were by a hot and dusty journey, they joyfully hailed Brandis, and it was with smiling faces that they alighted from the stage and hastened to greet him.

For his part, though he tried hard to be cheerful, it was easy to see the pain and sadness in his face.

"I hope there is nothing the matter with you, Walter," observed George Throop.

"Oh, no. I am all right."

"You look worried though."

In the group that was watching the arrival of the stage and its passengers was Jim Sartine, the tall and stalwart Marshal of Sandstone, and Jephtha Jones could not help noticing him.

"I was thinking," answered Brandis, "whether you had better go on just yet. You will need rest, and I have heard of trouble on the road. Come into the hotel, and we will talk it over when you have freshened up a bit."

"I hope there is no bad news from father," suggested Etta Throop. "It is so long since we got his last letter that I have been very anxious."

Jim Sartine's piercing black eyes were fixed on the girl when she alighted from the stage, and they followed her until she disappeared within the building.

Jephtha Jones noted that peculiar and baleful gaze, and a frown darkened his face.

"It is Colonel Double-edge—Devil Dick for sure," muttered the circus man, "and he looks at that girl as if he would like to eat her."

CHAPTER X.

CHINQUAPIN.

THERE was not a richer or lovelier ranch and range in the Gonzalez valley than that of Tom Throop.

It had promised to become in time a very pleasant home as well as a valuable property; but it was in the way of the grasping cattle men, and Tom Throop and his hopes were doomed.

It was a morning near the end of August when a small group stood at the ruins of the ranch, gazing sorrowfully at the piles of ashes and blackened timbers which was all that remained of poor Tom Throop's tireless efforts to provide a home for his family.

Their horses were tethered in the shade of the trees at the foot of the western hill; but there was nothing to temper the glare of the sun where the little group were standing.

Etta Throop and her brother George were there, neither of them in conventional mourning, but one wearing a black veil and the other a black band that spoke of their bereavement.

Though not a recent bereavement, it was recent to them because it was only lately that they had been made aware of it.

The other persons in the group were Walter Brandis and Jephtha Jones, and the desolation of the ruined ranch affected them, though they had not the sense of personal loss that troubled the young people.

"You may as well get back into the shade, Etta," said Walter Brandis when they had sadly gazed at the ruins for a while. "There is nothing more to be seen here."

"That is true," George Throop answered for his sister. "There is nothing more to be seen. The question now is, what is to be done?"

"If I could only be sure that father is dead," murmured Etta from under her veil.

"There can be no doubt of that," replied Brandis. "The people at Gonzalez are sure that he is dead, and Jep Jones knows a person who saw him killed."

"That is the lad they call Chinquapin," interrupted the circus man. "He promised to be here this morning, and there he comes. Let us go to the trees and meet him."

Jep pointed out a strange-looking specimen of humanity, who was slowly approaching along the base of the hill, mounted on a *burro*, or Mexican donkey.

He was a lad of perhaps eighteen or nineteen years, though his nondescript quality would hardly allow his age to be reasonably guessed at.

A tall young fellow for his years, chiefly remarkable for his great length of limb and his extreme thinness.

In fact, his feet nearly dragged the ground as he bestrode his *burro*, and his limbs looked as if he might pass muster in a museum as a living skeleton.

His skin, too, was as brown as a coffee-berry, and his long hair, uncut and uncombed, was as black and straight as an Indian's.

Yet his sharp features and his bright eyes gave him a peculiarly wide-awake expression,

and there were those who guessed him to be a mixture of Mexican and Yankee.

Nothing was certainly known of his origin, however, as he was a waif concerning whom nobody cared to inquire particularly, and it was generally supposed that he had been rescued from the Apaches or Navajos when he was a child.

Though he was valuable as a herder, he was of too restless a disposition to remain long in any employment, and had never formed any attachments, but was known only as a stray, who cared for nobody and for whom nobody cared.

His attire—if his rags deserved to be dignified by that name—fitted his character as a vagabond, though they could not pretend to fit his person, and were of the scantiest amount compatible with decency.

As he perceived the party approaching him, he dismounted from his donkey and waited for them in the shade.

"Here you are, then, Chinquapin," was the greeting of Jep Jones. "I knew that you would keep your promise and be here on time. Now you are going to show us where poor Tom Throop was killed."

The lad held out his hand.

"Yes, I promised you a dollar, and I suppose you want your pay in advance."

But Chinquapin had dropped his hand while Jep fumbled in his pocket, and was staring at Etta Throop, who had raised her veil so that she might get a better view of the human curiosity.

"Is that Tom Throop's gal?" he sharply demanded.

"Yes, that is his daughter," answered Jep.

"Here is your dollar, my boy."

"Don't want none o' your dollar—I'm workin' for her. Come along, then. I'll show you the place an' tell you all about it."

He started off at once, as if he owned the earth, carrying his head high, and measuring the ground with his long legs so rapidly that it was hard work for Jephtha Jones to keep up with him.

Etta Throop followed with the two young men, and would soon have been left far in the rear if the nondescript had not turned now and then to stare at her.

He led the party into a narrow gorge, or rift, in the hills, which he ascended to its head, and there he halted, and waited for the others to come up.

"This is the place," he said, and Etta Throop shuddered and dropped her veil as she realized that she had reached the spot where her father was brutally murdered.

The lad proceeded to tell the story of that murder, which must be here condensed from his language, and to some extent translated.

Tom Throop was alone in his house, and Chinquapin was standing outside near the front door, when the lad heard the galloping of horses, and saw the swift approach of the raiders who had just killed two herders.

He gave the alarm at once, and the ranchman, who instantly divined the nature and purpose of the attack, told him to run.

They did not think of pausing to make any defense, or to save anything from the house, as they knew they would be lucky if they could save their own lives.

The wolves had tasted blood, and their savage instincts demanded more.

The fugitives ran from the back of the house to the hill, and into the rift in which Chinquapin then stood.

But the raiders, who had caught sight of them as they attempted to escape, were well mounted, and of course gained on them rapidly.

The lad hastened to throw himself into a crack in the rock at the side of the gorge, and succeeded in wriggling his thin body like a snake into a hole where he was invisible.

But there was a small opening that enabled him to see what was going on outside, and he saw enough to make him crawl yet closer into the crevice that he had found.

Tom Throop ran to the head of the gorge, and was there overtaken by his pursuers before he could climb up into the hill.

Alone and unarmed, he could do nothing to defend himself, and was murdered brutally and in cold blood.

The rider who shot him was a tall and dark man, mounted on a bay horse, who fired two bullets into the victim's body after he had been shot down.

"That was Col. Double-edge," muttered the circus man.

When their bloody work was finished, they looked for the partner of the ranchman's flight, and searched the ravine thoroughly, too; but they would never have thought of looking for anybody in the narrow crevice into which he had squeezed himself.

At last they rode away, and when Chinquapin was quite sure that they had left the gorge, he crawled out and reconnoitered.

He was at once startled by the sight of flames and smoke in the direction which they had taken, and knew that they had set fire to the ranch buildings.

He went to look for Tom Throop, and found

the ranchman very dead indeed, pierced by three bullets, any one of which would have been enough to kill him.

"And thar's whar I buried him," said the lad as he brought his sad story to a conclusion, pointing at a stake near the edge of the ravine.

Etta Throop started as she was confronted by this evidence of the presence of her dead father, and her tears began to flow afresh.

"Then there can be no doubt of his death," said she.

"If you don't believe it, mum," coolly observed Chinquapin, "you kin dig 'im up."

He did not perceive the brutality of this remark until the girl burst into tears, and then he hastened to make amends.

"Didn't mean that, miss. Take it back. He's thar, though, and every word I've told you is true as gospel."

"Nobody doubts you, my friend," answered Jep Jones, "and we are all greatly obliged to you for what you have told us and shown us. But you should remember that it is her father who is dead there."

"Let us get away from this scene of murder," said Walter Brandis. "As George says, the question now is what is to be done, and we had better go back to the shade and talk it over."

When they returned to where they had left the horses it was soon made evident that Jeptha Jones had fixed and definite ideas of what should be done, and he proceeded to explain them.

"This ranch," he said to George Throop, "belongs to you and your sister, and a very pretty piece of land it is, one that is bound to be valuable when the country settles up. Now that you are here, why shouldn't you stay here?"

"There is no place to stay," objected Etta.

"You can stop at Gonzalez for a little while, and it won't take us long to run up a shelter that will do for the present. As we find time we can improve, and before winter sets in we can have things quite shipshape here."

"But you are forgetting the danger," suggested Brandis. "It won't do to expose Miss Throop and her brother to the same peril that their father suffered from."

"The danger is past now, my boy. Uncle Sam runs this province. A company of blue-coats is stationed at Gonzalez now, and the cattle fiends have had orders to leave the ranchers alone. Besides, I've got another scheme to offer."

"What is that?" inquired Walter.

"If you don't object, I will move my horses and traps over here—those that are left—as the place I was driven to don't suit me. I am promised capital enough, and am going to reorganize my show for another season. That will make quite a little settlement here, and I shall have at least half a dozen good men who can fight in a pinch. Among us we ought to give these young folks a good start on the ranch, and you know that the country is bound to settle up."

"That's so, Jep. The railroad is finished beyond Sandstone now, and I expect to be detailed to run a line out this way before long."

It was agreed that the circus man's ideas were good and acceptable, and before the party left the ruins they had decided that Etta should stop at Gonzalez for awhile, and that the men should at once set at work to run up a shelter.

"Me, too," emphatically observed Chinquapin as he mounted his burro.

CHAPTER XI.

SQUEEZED OUT.

WHILE the Throop orphans and their friends were settling the question of their immediate future in the Gonzalez valley, Sandstone was in the whirl of a great excitement.

The stir was caused by the approaching election for city marshal.

It is safe to say that a Presidential election would not have agitated the Sandstoners near as much as this; for the man who was to "run the town" was more important in their eyes than all other earthly authorities.

The question of an election had been sprung upon them somewhat unexpectedly.

There had been some talk of a doubt as to the time when Jim Sartine's term would legally end; but the public did not give the matter much thought until it was decisively settled.

Some of the city authorities who were secretly or openly opposed to the reigning favorite had obtained a decision from a court of competent jurisdiction to the effect that an election must be ordered for the first Tuesday in September, and it was ordered accordingly.

Jim Sartine and his friends generally took this change in good part, though they were not sparing in criticism of the men who had brought it about.

They believed that their favorite would be triumphantly if not almost unanimously re-elected, and considered the contest for the office a mere matter of form.

It was true that there was an opposition which became daily and hourly stronger and more decided; but it was supposed to be such an opposition as would be easily overcome.

This opposition was largely composed of what

in older communities would be styled the disorderly element.

Nothing was more natural than that the roughs and rowdies, whose numbers of late had considerably increased in Sandstone, should take sides against an official who had been so resolute and constant in the suppression of disorder, and who in the discharge of his duty had been quick to shoot down those who resisted him.

But there was no doubt among Jim Sartine's supporters that the orderly element in Sandstone would easily outvote the disorderly element.

The roughs had put up as a candidate Mike Hooligan, who kept a saloon which was the acknowledged head-quarters of the hard cases.

Nothing could have suited Sartine's friends better than this, as it made the issue so clear and distinct that the friends of order could have no excuse for voting against him.

But an unexpected and unwelcome complication arose.

Sam Sholes, previously mentioned as the proprietor of the "Onward" Saloon, announced himself as a candidate for city marshal.

He was regarded, as it happened, not only as a highly respectable citizen, but as one of the truest friends of the cause of order.

This development was a matter of painful surprise to the incumbent and his friends, who held a consultation to consider it and decide what should be done about it.

It was settled that Jim Sartine himself, who was on the best of terms with Sam Sholes, should go to him and ask him in a plain and straightforward manner what he meant by his movement.

The marshal could find no fault with the manner of the saloon-keeper, who was quite as plain and straightforward as he was.

Nothing could be more open and above-board than his statement.

"It's all as clear as day, Jim," said the new candidate. "I am workin' for you, as you ought to know, and am playin' your game."

"Glad to hear that," answered Sartine; "but it is not quite as clear as day. I don't see how you are working for me when you have started in to run against me."

"That's jest the p'int, Jim. You don't seem to look inter things quite as deep as you might ha' done, and that's amazin' to me. As you wouldn't look out for yourself, I've been lookin' out for you."

"Kind of you, Sammy; but I don't seem to catch on."

"You know that Mike Hooligan is runnin' ag'inst you."

"Yes, and now you have jumped in."

"But why?"

"That's the question."

"The answer's easy. If you had looked into things, Jim, as deep as you ought, you'd ha' found out that Hooligan is pickin' up lots o' votes, and that he is likely to make a closer run ag'inst you than you think. He is a dangerous customer, Jim, for a fact. As soon as I saw how things was goin', my game was plain, and I came out as a candidate, to make sure of beatin' Hooligan. I'll be likely to take a heap of votes from him, without drawin' one away from you. See?"

The candidate did see, and he thanked Sam Sholes for his friendly move.

"You're quite welcome," said Sholes, "and between Hooligan and me you'll slide into the office as easy as rollin' off a log."

Jim Sartine promptly reported this explanation to his counselors, who were also satisfied that the friendship of Sam Sholes was to be depended on.

So the contest went on to the end without more excitement than might be expected, and with few collisions and casualties.

On election day the friends of law and order—meaning the friends of Jim Sartine—armed themselves and guarded the polls for the expressed purpose of preventing the Hooligan crowd from playing "roots" on them.

As everybody was armed and on guard against everybody else, there was nothing peculiar in this precaution.

It proved to be, however, entirely unnecessary.

There was never a quieter election in Sandstone, and a more docile and demure set of men than the Hooligan crowd could not have been discovered at that place and time.

They were unusually and unexpectedly sober, and they did not gather about the polls in bodies; but they peaceably slipped in their unobtrusive ballots and went their several ways without making any trouble for anybody.

Such a state of things was so wonderful and unheard-of that it might well have aroused the suspicion that mischief was brewing somewhere on the sly.

But it only begot in the minds of Jim Sartine and his friends the belief that the roughs and rowdies recognized the uselessness of making a fight, and that Hooligan had practically abandoned the contest.

It was not until the day was more than half over that the Sartine side awoke to a sense of the new danger that threatened them.

It leaked out in one way and another that Sam Sholes was polling an unexpectedly large

vote, while Mike Hooligan was scarcely running at all.

This development nearly paralyzed the law and order men, and it was natural that they should suspect treachery.

Some of them hastened to hunt up Sam Sholes, who had not been seen near the polls during the day.

But he was not to be found.

He had gone out of town on private business, it was said, and was taking no personal interest in the election.

One of his intimate friends expressed the opinion that some of the demoralized Hooligan men were voting for him out of spite, but their spite work would probably amount to nothing, as Jim Sartine might be expected to have a walk over.

But Sartine and his friends had become uneasy, and they hastened to rally their forces and bring up the stragglers before the end of the battle.

The result proved that their apprehensions had been well founded, as the count showed that Sam Sholes had been elected City Marshal of Sandstone, not by a heavy majority, but by one that was too big to be questioned.

He had polled almost the entire Hooligan vote, and had drawn enough from Sartine's supporters to carry him in.

There was scarcely a doubt in the minds of the vanquished party that the election was a "skin game," a clear case of bargain and sale, and that Sam Sholes had been elected in the Hooligan interest according to a pre-arranged scheme that had worked to a charm.

But there was nothing to be done about it, and not even the satisfaction of whipping or killing somebody could reasonably be had.

Sam Sholes professed to be unutterably astonished at the result, and the Hooligan faction kept very quiet.

They carefully refrained from any public demonstration of rejoicing, as it might lead to a row.

They were well aware of the fact that Jim Sartine was still in power, and that he and his friends would delight in making it hot for his opponents upon the slightest provocation.

But no provocation was offered, and it was generally remarked among the Sandstoners that they had never known an election so like a funeral, except that there was a lamentable lack of corpses.

As for Jim Sartine, so unexpectedly squeezed out of his position, a new Othello with his "occupation gone," he declared his intention of getting away from Sandstone as soon as his term should expire.

"I know where I can get good pay for guarding mines," said he, "and that is what I shall catch onto for a while, anyhow."

His many friends gave him a good send-off when he left Sandstone, assuring him that they would welcome him and care for him whenever he chose to return.

CHAPTER XII.

DANCING TO ORDER.

THE little party of four friends in the Gonzalez valley had been hurrying forward their affair at a lively rate.

Jeptha Jones proved to be a man of infinite energy, a considerable portion of which he infused into his associates, who were surprised at the rapidity with which they made the work progress.

The circus man, too, exhibited such fertility of resource and contrivance that he easily took the lead in all matters relating to the restoration of the ranch, and even Walter Brandis, civil engineer as he was, gracefully yielded the control of the work to his friend.

Jep was aided in this by four good men, his own employees, who were old circus hands and necessarily Jacks at all trades.

In a very short time a sufficient house had been run up, with a few outbuildings, and Jep had brought back to the valley the remainder of his circus stock and "traps" which he had previously been obliged to remove to a safer location.

Thus the ranch became quite a settlement, and presented a busy scene, to which the presence of Etta Throop added an element of beauty and brightness that was highly appreciated by every member of the party.

Chinquapin, who persisted in attaching himself to his new friends, and who was one of the most ardent admirers of Etta, had already rendered valuable services to the Throops.

Since the death of Tom Throop he had kept track of the scattered sheep, and when the ranch was re-established he hunted them up and bought back a considerable portion of them, which was a saving of no small consequence.

Having done his share of providing for his friends at least a temporary abiding place, Jep Jones proceeded to attend to his own affairs.

He had enlisted a capitalist in his enterprise, who was to supply him with money for refitting and reorganizing the circus, and on that score he had nothing to trouble him.

But it would be necessary to procure fresh "attractions" and new "talent," which must be purchased or engaged in time, and for this

purpose it was necessary to use not only the mails, but the telegraph when he could reach it.

He could only reach the telegraph by going to Tucson, and he could only get to Tucson by taking the stage that ran through Gonzalez three times a week.

Jeptha Jones had no objection to the stage as a mode of travel, and he had no fear of stage robbers, as he was not in the habit of carrying any considerable sums of money upon his person.

Besides, no stages had been interfered with since the disappearance of the dreaded Devil Dick, and travel in that region was considered reasonably safe.

The circus man reached Tucson in good order, attended to his business there, and set out to return to Gonzalez.

The stage, as it happened, carried but three passengers besides himself—two Mexicans and a Gonzalez storekeeper.

As Jep Jones did not fancy the society of those people, he mounted to a seat by the side of the driver, a man with whom he was well acquainted, and who was glad to have his company during the lonesome trip.

The driver, too, must have been a distant relative of Jep's, as he was a member of the great Jones family, and his front name was Sam.

The return journey was as quiet and uneventful as the trip to Tucson had been, until Chiapa Pass was reached.

Then there was a sudden and startling change of programme.

Four men stepped out from behind the rocks near the entrance of the pass, and ordered the stage to halt.

As the order was enforced by leveled rifles, Sam Jones made no objection to obeying it instantly and as a matter of course.

But there was something peculiar and quite unusual about the men who had taken a fancy to "hold up" the stage.

They were Indians, or at least had the appearance of red-men, wearing the garb of the ordinary Indians of the Territory, with a full allowance of paint, which made them look ugly enough, if not fearful.

"What does this mean, Sam?" demanded the circus man as the four horses were brought to a stand-still. "Since when have the Indians begun to go into the stage-robbing business?"

"Them ain't no Injuns," answered Sam in a tone of disgust. "Them's white men fixed up to look like Injuns, so's they won't be known."

"It makes a good disguise, I should say. But we will know what they are soon enough."

Of this there could be no doubt, as the sham red-skins began operations without the least delay, and the orders of their leader were given in unmistakable English, and with accent and intonation that no Indian could have imitated.

The express-box was thrown down in accordance with the directions of the chief, but proved to contain nothing of value, and the mail-bag was also nearly empty.

Then came the turn of the passengers, who were ordered to step down and out and form a line, an order which they obeyed with alacrity if not with entire willingness.

Jeptha Jones, who had but few valuables on his person, was not at all dismayed by this procedure, and the result showed that his fellow-passengers had about as good cause to be indifferent.

A search of the crowd revealed so little of value that the captors loudly declared their disgust, piling abusive epithets upon the poverty-stricken crowd whose pockets yielded such poor pickings.

The passengers could stand this well enough, in view of the fact that they were such light losers; but the road-agents were not satisfied.

As the pecuniary results of their enterprise were so extremely disagreeable, it was natural that they should seek to get even with their victims in some other way.

So they passed from abuse to blows, and an occasional kick or prod admonished the passengers that they should have taken better care to provide themselves with cash.

The driver, whose ready compliance with the order to halt caused him to be well treated, sat serenely on his box and waited for his passengers, as if the performance was only an ordinary incident of a tiresome journey.

Jeptha Jones, also, was not worried by the search and subsequent rough treatment of the passengers.

There was another matter that absorbed his attention to the expulsion of everything else that was going on about him.

It was the leader of the stage-robbers who took his eye and held it.

Jep had been attracted by the appearance of this individual as soon as he stepped out from behind the rocks and showed himself in front of the stage.

Though the Indian garb and paint made about as complete a disguise as a man need to care for, there was something in his form and gait and general style that the circus man seemed to recognize.

Jep's suspicions were strengthened when the sham Indian spoke the order that halted the

stage, and when he took his place in the line he watched the object of his suspicions more closely.

A little too closely, in fact, as his watching drew upon him the notice of the leader of the gang, who proceeded to pay him some attentions which Jep would willingly have had omitted from the programme.

The business-end of a black snake whip, known as a "quirt," touched the circus man in a tender spot, and he was ordered to step out into the road and dance.

He needed no second intimation, but proceeded to dance as well as the circumstances would allow, the sharp crack of the whip quickening his motions whenever he lagged or stumbled.

Still he kept a flashing eye upon the man who wielded the long "quirt," and the redness of his cheeks was not entirely due to his unwonted exercise.

When the road-agent tired of the dance, he was ordered to stand on his head, and the order was instantly obeyed.

Then he was compelled to turn somersets and go through other acrobatic performances, the whip touching him sharply when he hesitated or paused to take breath.

The robbers roared with laughter, and the other passengers forgot their own discomforts in their enjoyment of the circus man's antics, and the driver fairly shook the stage with his guffaws.

But there was not the least bit of sport in the business to Jeptha Jones.

This was kept up until he was scarcely able to stand, when his tormentors decided that they had got enough of it.

"That'll do!" cried the leader of the gang. "Let the scawlags slide off! We ought to hang one of them, to pay us for the trouble we've had with the scaly crowd."

"That dancin' jack would make a fine figger to dance from the limb of a tree," suggested one of his comrades.

"Yes, and he deserves it, too; but we'll let him sneak off with the rest. He had better not make any sort of a fool of himself after this, though, or I will settle him in short order."

The robbers went their way, and the passengers resumed their places in the stage, and the driver whipped up his horses and continued his journey.

Jeptha Jones was unusually silent after he had again taken his seat on the stage-box.

His flesh smarted where the whip had stung him; but that was not the only matter that was preying on his mind.

His lips were pressed tightly together, and the expression of his countenance was not a pleasant one.

But the driver was not disposed to respect his reserve or allow him to remain silent.

"The tallest one of them painted cusses seemed to have a sort o' spite ag'in' you, old man," he remarked.

"It looked that way," answered Jep. "It felt that way, too."

"Oh, they're bound to have their little jokes. But it was queer that he should pick you out to practice on. Shouldn't wonder, now, if he knewed you."

"I knew him, anyhow."

"That's a p'int. Who was he?"

"I am not ready to say."

"He must ha' knowed you, then."

"I suppose he did, and that his idea was to scare me so that I would keep my tongue still about it."

"Did he skeer you up to that mark?"

"Not much."

"From what I know o' you, old man," observed the other Jones, "I'm ready to bet that he went to work the wrong way."

CHAPTER XIII.

FAIR WARNING.

JEPHTHA JONES kept his tongue still enough during the remainder of the trip to Gonzalez, and his friend the driver was unable to extract any further information from him.

It was not until he reached the ranch in the valley that he was ready to tell what he knew or thought he knew.

Then his friends easily perceived from his look and manner that there had been some unusual occurrence, and they gathered about him and besieged him with questions.

"Ob, you needn't worry me," he answered. "I am ready enough to tell you. The point of the business is that Jim Sartine, the Marshal of Sandstone, has come back to this range."

"Devil Dick, you mean," suggested Walter Brandis.

"Give him that name if you want to. Both names mean the same man. He has come back here, and has taken up his old trade of stage-robbing."

The circus man proceeded to relate his adventure at Chiapa Pass, and gave all the details, without toning down any of the features of the indignities that he had been made to suffer.

"Indian dress and paint make a good disguise," observed Walter Brandis. "Are you sure, Jep, that the leader of the gang was Devil Dick?"

"Yes, and I am sure that he was Jim Sartine."

"It seems to me that the story you have told proves that they can't be the same man. We left Jim Sartine in Sandstone, where he was holding the important and responsible position of city marshal. Is it at all likely that he would have taken another long vacation so soon, and would have come up here to run the chances of a stage-robbing career?"

"He did that thing once before, and why shouldn't he do it again?"

"It is so unreasonable, Jep, that I am afraid you have gone wrong on that point. Could he keep his office and leave his duty like that?"

"Perhaps he has not kept his office. Before we left Sandstone there was talk of the chance of a new election."

"If there should be a new election he would find it easy enough to run in again."

"Maybe he didn't have as easy a thing as you thought he had. Anyhow, I am sure that he was the leader of the gang that robbed that stage. I wish I could be as sure of bringing the scoundrel to justice."

"Who is the man?" inquired George Throop.

"He is the man," answered Jep, "who helped to destroy this ranch, who killed two of your father's herders, and who then chased your father into the pass yonder and murdered him."

"Why had you not told me this before?"

"I was waiting for more facts—to get a better hold on the man. But I will tell you the whole story now."

"Not just yet, Jep," interposed Brandis. "The story will wait, and there is a matter of more immediate importance pressing on us just now."

"What is that?"

"The cattle men are beginning to make trouble again."

"What have they done?"

"It seems that this ranch is in their way, and that they are determined to get rid of it. One of them rode up here yesterday to give us warning."

"Only one?"

"One of the big cattle-owners, I judge. He was a heavily-built man, with a red face and red hair."

"I know him—Jack Koopman. He is a tough customer. What was his talk?"

"He said that he did not want to make trouble for us, but the cattle men would not allow this ranch to remain here. It was right in their track, he said, and he hoped we would go peaceably, but go we must. The fencing must all be taken away, and the sheep and cattle driven across the range, and the entire ranch must be, in fact, wiped out. He was kind enough to offer to help move the buildings."

Jep Jones was naturally troubled by this piece of news; but there was an eager look in his face, as if he scented something more than was visible in the business.

"There was ice mixed with that offer," said he. "How did you answer him, Walter?"

"I was very careful, and said as little as possible. George Throop wanted to fire up and talk back; but I succeeded in keeping him under. I told Jack Koopman, as you call him, that I was sorry to hear that the ranch was in his way, and that we would think of what he had said and consider his offer. I thought it best to wait for you before saying or doing anything definite."

"Good boy!" exclaimed Jep. "When it comes to cool and careful level-headedness, Walter, you take the cake. I have sometimes thought that you are a little too slow and cautious; but you average mighty well."

"I think you will find me quick enough when the time comes for action," remarked Walter.

"Well, there is one thing that needs to be done right away. One of us must go to Gonzalez, and report this thing to the soldiers there."

Walter shook his head sadly.

"It's no use," said he. "I have already tried that. The soldiers are no longer there."

"The deuce you say!"

"They were ordered away day before yesterday. Trouble is reported with the Apaches at the westward."

"That is bad for us. Of course the cattle men heard of it, and prepared to bounce us without loss of time. Well, boys, as we are thrown on our own resources, we must go right to work and get ready."

"Ready for what?" inquired Walter.

"Ready to fight, of course. At least, that's what this chicken means to do. Do you propose anything else?"

"Nothing at all. That is what I want to do. Since we have established our friends here, we must not let them be driven away as long as we are able to lift a finger. I was only waiting for you to give the word, as you have been running the ranch so far."

"The word is fight, then, my boy. I don't propose to be driven off, either. I have settled on this place for wintering and refitting my show, and I mean to stick to it. I've got four good men, who have been through many a circus campaign, and of course they are loaded with grit and used to scrimmages. Then there's

us three and Chinguapin, a lad who will do to bet on."

"That's so," joined in George Throop, "and my sister has made him a present of a good rifle, which he is immensely proud of."

"There's eight of us, then, and eight ought to make what you might call a decent sort of a fight. Ever been in a fight, Walter?"

"Well, we have had musses along the line of the road, some of which were rather serious, but nothing that could pass as a regular engagement."

"You know the feel of it, though. How is it with you, George?"

"I have seen pistols fired and knives drawn in Tennessee, but I never happened to take a hand in any of those little difficulties."

"Then there's lots of fun waiting for you. I must confess that I am one of those infernal fools who are fond of a fight, though I never rush into one blind-eyed as some folks do. Perhaps I wouldn't hanker after that sort of thing if I had been badly hurt; but I have been lucky so far."

"There's a good bit in that," observed George Throop.

"Quite likely. But you should see a lot of circus men when a town rises against them. They know that they have nobody but themselves to fall back upon, and that foul play and no quarter is the style of their enemies. Then you may bet your last dollar that they pitch into a fight red-eyed, and work it for all it is worth. By the way, Walter, were my four Spartan heroes in sight when Jack Koopman called?"

"No; they were off in the hills, hunting your trick mule that had gone astray."

"That is a good thing, as the cattle baron won't calculate on them, and will think he has a soft snap here. The toughness of it may amaze him."

CHAPTER XIV.

FORCED TO FIGHT.

THERE was one member of the party who was not at all elated by the thought of a collision with the cattle men, and that one was naturally Etta Thorpe.

It was not a bit pleasing to her that her friends should have a fight on their hands on the condition of holding her father's land and maintaining the ranch which they had re-established, and she protested against it vehemently.

"Some of you may get hurt," she declared. "Some of you may get killed. I could not stand that. I will not allow it. Let the place go. Let everything go. There is nothing here that is worth fighting for."

"My property is worth fighting for," insisted the circus man, "and our friends here are not disposed to have their rights taken from them without a struggle. If we give up now, we can expect nothing less than to be kicked out of the country."

Etta renewed her protest, and specially implored her brother and Walter Brandis not to risk their lives; but they were determined to stand up for their rights.

"It's no use talking, young lady," rejoined Jep. "That point is settled, and all we have to do is to settle you. The best way to do that will be to ship you off to Gonzalez."

She insisted that she would not suffer herself to be shipped off to Gonzalez or anywhere else, but would stay with her friends if they were bent upon staying.

"We will see about that in the morning," answered Jep. "It is too late to send you to Gonzalez to-night; but you must go early in the morning—that is, unless—"

"So there is an if in the matter, Mr. Jones?" she observed.

"Yes. The fact is that we don't know when to look for these land-grabbers. It is generally a word and a blow with them, and they are not apt to give the word time to settle before they strike the blow. So we must be ready to meet them at any moment."

No time was lost in making all possible preparations for the expected encounter.

The weapons and ammunition of the men were overhauled, and the plan of defense was explained as well as Jep could form it in advance.

The sheep were driven off into the hills at the westward, and the horses and cattle were concealed in the canyon where Tom Throop met his fate.

A woodpile in front of the house was arranged to serve as a defensive work, and a guard was posted during the night, while the rest of the men slept with their rifles within reach.

Early in the morning two of Jep Jones's circus men, who were well acquainted with the country, mounted their horses and rode across the valley, to act as vedettes and give information of the approach of the enemy.

Immediate preparations were made for sending the female non-combatant to Gonzalez, where she would be out of danger and at the same time out of the way of her belligerent friends.

But Etta Throop stoutly objected to any such expulsion, and firmly declared her intention of staying right there as long as the rest chose to stay.

While they were arguing this point with the young lady, the two scouts came galloping back and put a sudden stop to the discussion.

It did not need any information from the returning men to make Jep Jones and his followers aware of what they had to expect.

The cattle baron and his crew could be seen riding down the opposite slope of the valley toward the ranch.

It was easy to count them, as Jep and his friends hastened to take their positions at the woodpile.

They numbered twelve men, and, of course, every man of them was well-mounted, armed to the teeth, and more than willing to fight at the lift of Jack Koopman's finger.

"There's a big squad of them," muttered the circus man. "They must have plenty of time for fun just now. But I reckon they will get their hands full in trying to take a rise out of us."

The two scouts speedily put their horses out of the way, and took their places at the woodpile with the rest.

Jack Koopman and his party must have come to the conclusion that they might meet a stubborn resistance, as their conduct showed unusual caution.

They came to a halt at a considerable distance from the woodpile, and there was evidently a consultation among them.

Then a man rode slowly forward to within a short distance of the improvised fortification, and hailed its defenders.

"Get up and talk to him, Walter," was Jep's order. "Tell him that he and his crowd had better keep away from here, or they will get hurt."

Walter Brandis mounted the woodpile. He was excited to the fighting pitch and thoroughly determined.

"What do you want?" he shouted.

"Are you the man that Jack Koopman spoke to the other day?" demanded the rider.

"Yes!"

"He gave you warning, then. Do you mean to waltz off of there, or shall we come and kick you off?"

"Neither scheme will work, young man. If there is any waltzing to be done, Jack Koopman and his gang had better waltz back to their own stamping-ground. We have nothing but bullets here for thieves and murderers."

These were words with business in them, and the speaker's manner showed that he meant what he said.

Jack Koopman's cowboy was satisfied.

He turned his horse without another word, and rode back to his companions.

Walter Brandis jumped down, and was congratulated upon having said the right thing in the right way.

To Jephtha Jones it had seemed highly probable that the man who had murdered Tom Throop and the two herders would be employed to take part in this new raid, and he looked for him in the cattle men's party.

His expectations were realized.

He saw among them the man whom he believed he had known in Arizona as Devil Dick or Colonel Double-edge, and in Texas as Jim Sartine.

To this man he called the attention of Walter Brandis, and pointed him out to George Throop.

"Notice that tall and dark man, George," he said—"him on the big black horse. That is the man who murdered your father after burning his house."

George clutched his rifle, and sighted over the barrel at the tall, dark man.

"He does look like Jim Sartine," muttered Walter, "though it is impossible that he should be that man. But I will soon see him closer, as it is certain that they mean to go for us."

This fact was soon evident enough.

When the messenger had returned and reported, there was another consultation among the cattle men.

Doubtless they had not expected such a defiant tone, which naturally indicated a stubborn resistance.

After awhile they separated into two squads, and rode forward as if with the intention of attacking the fortification on each flank.

But this maneuver had been foreseen and provided against, as the woodpile reached backward on each side to within a short distance of the house.

As soon as the purpose of the assailants was perceived, Jep Jones divided his party so as to meet the double attack.

He hastened to the defense of the left of the woodpile, with Chinguapin and two of his circus hands, while Walter Brandis took the other side, with George Throop and the other two men.

The cattle men had also divided evenly, and they began to circle around as they climbed the slope, as if with the intention of attacking the position from the rear.

As that sort of scheme must be prevented if possible, Jephtha Jones ordered his men to fire upon each party as it advanced.

This they could easily do, as their rifles were all breech-loaders, and they had an abundant supply of ammunition.

Four shots from each side of the woodpile told

the cattle men that their adversaries meant business and that they had no slouches to deal with.

As at least two of the shots counted, it was at once evident that such a galling fire on the flanks of the attacking party could not be endured.

They might keep out of range until they should get behind the house; but they could not expect to find themselves much better off in that position.

Their best chance was a direct and headlong attack, and at that their numbers would not avail them as they had the disadvantage of fighting in the open, while their foes were protected by the woodpile.

Sharp Jephtha Jones had calculated upon that effect of the flank firing, and was decidedly of the opinion that he would have them then where he wanted them.

So he cautioned his friends to be ready, as hot work was coming.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ONSLAUGHT.

ON came the cattle men, spurring their horses to their best speed, and firing as they charged the woodpile on both its flanks.

They did not fire at random, either, as most of them were men who could shoot from the saddle at a gallop quite as effectively as inferior marksmen could fire from a rest.

But the men whom they were attacking were protected by their barricade of logs, and Jephtha Jones had specially cautioned those under his immediate control to take care that they should not expose any portion of their persons.

There was no need that they should do so, as the openings between the roughly-piled logs and limbs were amply sufficient to allow them to see their foes and take aim.

Carefully and with deadly intent they took aim, as they sent shot after shot at the cowboys who came galloping madly toward them, yelling and firing as they charged, more like Indians than white men.

It was a fire that told, too.

The circus man and his friends did not willingly throw away a shot, as they were fully aware of the fact that no quarter awaited them if they should be worsted in the fight.

Some of them, too, were aware of the fact that their fighting must be done before their enemies should get so near that those approaching the barricade on one side could fire over it into the backs of the defenders on the other side.

No such dangerous advantage must be allowed if it could be prevented, and consequently they shot to kill.

But there was a strange circumstance connected with the firing.

Toward Jep Jones's side of the barricade rode the tall and dark man on the big black horse whom he had pointed out to George Throop and Walter Brandis as the one he knew as Dick the Devil and as Jim Sartine.

Jep was certain that he was the desperado who had made himself dreaded in Arizona as Col. Double-edge, or Dick the Devil, and was equally sure of his identity with the Marshal of Sandstone.

Believing this, the circus man was prompted alike by duty and inclination to kill him, and honestly endeavored to do so, for his own sake, for the sake of his friends, and for the sake of the public at large.

It was natural, also, that he should seek to repay with rifle-shots the stings of a whip which he had sustained at the hands of the sham Indian who robbed the stage in Chiapa Pass.

Such indignities rankle in the breast when more serious injuries may be forgotten.

But his utmost efforts, made with the best intentions, were all utterly in vain.

When the assailants started toward the woodpile, he cautioned his comrades that he would mark that man for his own, and advised them not to waste their shots by firing at him.

Straight on rode Devil Dick, but not in the style of his cowboy companions.

He neither uttered a shout nor fired a shot.

His rifle was so placed that both his hands were free, and one of them held his bridle-rein, while the other clutched the coils of a lariat.

Straight on he rode, a little in advance of the others, never swerving from his course, and sitting firm and erect in his saddle, while the big black horse bore him forward with great strides.

It seemed a pity to try to kill a man of such splendid figure and fearless mien; but Jephtha Jones did his best to kill him.

Again and again he fired; but both shots were ineffective, though he could not have asked a better mark.

Two of the cowboys dropped from their saddles in that headlong charge; but Devil Dick rode steadily on, apparently untouched, smiling grimly as he neared the barricade and handled the coils of his lariat.

The circus man, amazed at his misses, must have fancied that there was something supernatural in this, as he was so nervous that he missed his third shot also, though his foe was then close upon him.

Angered by his failures, he drew his revolver

and jumped up on a log, so that the upper half of his person showed plainly above the low barricade.

He was not in time to use his revolver at close quarters, but was just in time for something else.

Hardly had he jumped up on the log when something dropped over his shoulders and tightened around his arms.

The next instant he was jerked over the barricade and dragged down upon the earth on the other side.

Luckily the noose had dropped below his neck.

If it had tightened a trifle sooner, he would have been quickly strangled to death.

But he was helpless in its clutch, and his rough contact with the logs and limbs of the woodpile bruised him severely, and when he dropped on the outside the breath was nearly knocked out of him.

The big black horse started away at a gallop that promised to put a speedy end to the existence of Jephtha Jones.

And so it would have done, but for the intervention of Chinquapin.

The lad was near Jep when the lasso was flung, and as it settled over the circus man's shoulders he leaped up on the log to cut it, but was too late.

He sprang over the woodpile as his friend was dragged away, and the black horse had scarcely started when Chinquapin threw himself upon the victim, clutching the rawhide rope with his left hand, while with the right he wielded his knife.

At the risk of having his arm jerked from the socket, he clung on, and succeeded in pressing the keen edge of his knife against the twisted hide.

With a crack it parted, and, relieved from the strait of the weight it carried, flew away as a serpent springs.

The black horse, also suddenly relieved, stumbled and fell, and Devil Dick, who had been spurring on without looking behind him, fell with the horse.

When he had recovered himself and remounted his steed, he looked around for the man he had lassoed, naturally supposing that the lariat had broken; but the man was not visible.

Chinquapin, with an exertion of strength of which he could scarcely have been supposed to be capable, had picked up his friend and tumbled him over the barricade, leaping after him into the inclosure.

Instantly he grabbed his rifle, and was on guard again and ready for action.

In the mean time an exciting event had taken place at the other flank of the woodpile fortification.

George Throop, who incautiously exposed himself at the beginning of the action on that side, was struck by a bullet from the rifle of one of the charging cowboys, and was knocked out of the fight.

His sister, who was standing in the house, watching the fray through the partly-opened door, uttered a shrill scream as George fell backward.

But there was more of vengeance than of terror in her cry, and she did not content herself with a useless scream.

Flung the door wide open, she rushed down into the inclosure, and in a few seconds was at the side of her wounded brother.

She did not stop an instant to notice whether he was alive or dead, but seized his rifle and took his place at the barricade, opening fire at once upon the charging cattle men.

Her fire was quite as effective as her brother's could have been, and the others were so inspired by her example that they threw themselves into the work with the utmost vigor and determination.

The result was that the attack on that side of the woodpile was a disastrous failure to the cattle men.

Three of them dropped out before they were near enough to do any more damage, and Jack Koopman, who was the leader there, was so astonished at the hot reception of his party that he ordered a retreat.

It was well for him, perhaps, that he did so, as he and the remaining two had as much as they could do to take care of their fallen comrades.

It was then that the cowboys put in some of their best work.

Like the Indians, they would not leave a man on the field, and their display of horsemanship was only equaled by their daring.

It was a fine sight to see one of them suddenly bring his galloping horse to a stand at the side of a dead or wounded friend, reach down and pick up the man, and then bear him away at full speed.

While they were engaged in this duty, they were not molested by their foes at the woodpile, who were only too glad to get rid of them, and to turn their attention elsewhere.

By this time the other side of the fortification was equally clear of enemies.

Col. Double-edge had three men with him there; but the retreat of Jack Koopman and the others speedily determined their action, and

they lost no time in getting out of range of the rifles that had done so much harm among them.

The two parties soon came together, and, after a brief halt, slowly and sadly rode away across the valley.

As they carried off their dead and wounded, the party at the woodpile had no means of ascertaining their actual loss; but it was certain that Jack Koopman had been dealt a blow from which he would not be likely to speedily recover.

Etta Throop had in the mean time hastened with Walter Brandis to the assistance of her brother, and Chinquapin was attending to the needs of Jephtha Jones.

The former was found to be very seriously hurt, the ball that struck him having broken his collar-bone and passed downward and outward; but it was hoped that no vital part had been touched, though he was suffering severely from the shock and loss of blood.

Jep Jones soon recovered his senses, and was able to stand alone.

He was quite sure that he had sustained no real injury, though he was bruised all over, and declared that he felt as if he had been flung through a knothole.

Two of his men had been slightly wounded, one by a bullet and one by a splinter, and that was the sum total of the casualties on the side of the defenders of the ranch.

George Throop was taken into the house and cared for as well as possible, while one of the circus men was mounted on a fast horse and hurried off to Gonzalez for a physician.

Jephtha Jones, when he discovered that he was entirely safe and comparatively sound, was overjoyed at the successful defense of the ranch.

"George Throop is badly hurt," he said; "but he will soon be about with such care as he will get here. That is the only drawback. Everything else worked splendidly, much better than we could have hoped for. The business is settled now. The ranch is safe, and I fancy that Jack Koopman and his crew won't want to worry us again."

"How about the tall, dark man on the black horse?" inquired Brandis.

"Oh, the scoundrel! Did you notice him, Walter? Did you see him close?"

"Not as close as you did, I suppose, but well enough to recognize him."

"You know, then, that he is Jim Sartine?"

"It seems impossible, but he is the exact image of the Marshal of Sandstone."

"I am sure, too, that he is Devil Dick, or Col. Double-edge, the stage robber and cold-blooded murderer. But it seems that Satan protects his own. It drives me wild to think that when I had such a fine chance at that wretch I drew a bead on him three times and missed him every time."

"It must have been his daring that saved him. His cool and determined style was something splendid, and it is evident that he meant to make a sure thing of you, Jep."

"Yes, and he would have succeeded if it hadn't been for Chinquapin here. That boy will do to bet on every time. It saddens me to think that I was of no use in the fight, as every shot of mine was thrown away."

"Devil Dick was as much out of the fight as you were."

"But he got his work in, all the same, just as he meant to, and I am afraid that we would all have been in a bad fix if it hadn't been for Miss Throop. She is entitled to go up head and stay there."

CHAPTER XVI.

A DISGUISED DESPERADO.

THE next morning Jephtha Jones, feeling quite well and hearty, though a little sore in his flesh and bones, rode alone to Gonzalez, on business connected with the ranch and his own affairs.

Gonzalez was a straggling little town, rather more Mexican than American, a queer mixture of the two styles of civilization, but rapidly acquiring the characteristics of the newer order.

Adobe buildings, whose age nobody knew, were scattered about the plaza with cheap and showy shanties that were not intended to last for any length of time.

Mexicans in serapes and sombreros lounged about, jostled by wide-awake Americans in red shirts and felt hats.

With these mixed, but did not mingle, ugly and slouchy Indians, their faces streaked with red and yellow ocher, and their attire a grotesque complication of the aboriginal garb and the cast-off clothing of their conquerors.

These differing nationalities had but one thing that was really common to them—they all drank the same whisky.

Jephtha Jones, after placing his horse where it would be cared for, moistened his interior with a glass of the customary beverage, in which operation he easily found a friend to join him.

He then went to the stage and express office, where he had some business to transact that was connected with his circus enterprise.

At the entrance of this establishment he saw a Mexican lounging about, whose appearance struck him as peculiar.

This man was of tall and stalwart build,

much taller and larger than the average of Mexicans.

He wore a large serape, although the weather was warm and dry, and was also noticeable by reason of a very heavy black beard.

Near him was a large black horse, that stood without being hitched at a post in front of the building.

In the horse, as well as the man, there was something that struck Jep Jones as familiar; but he gave them no notice at the time, further than a quick glance that took in the particulars that have been mentioned.

He passed into the office, where he met Sam Jones, the driver of the stage that had been "held up" in Chiapa Pass, and the two men greeted each other cordially.

Jep Jones quickly transacted his business at the express office, and then had a chat with the other Jones, beginning with indifferent matters, and soon striking a subject that was interesting to both.

"Sam," he said, "do you remember, Colonel Double-edge?"

"Remember him?" answered the driver. "I should say I do. Reckon I've cause to. He gave me the roughest deal I've ever had in these parts. I'd remember him a good bullet's worth if I should ever set eyes on him again."

"Do you think you would know him if you should see him again?"

"Well, I ought to know Devil Dick. The first time he held me up, jest outside o' this town, he dropped his mask, and I had a good, square look at his face, to say nothin' of his form. Yes, I'd know him."

Jep Jones kept glancing out of the open window at the tall Mexican, who was still lounging near the black horse.

"You are mistaken about that, pard," said he. "You did not know him the other day when he held up your stage in Chiapa Pass."

"What! do you mean to say that the sham Injun thar—"

"Was Devil Dick? Yes, that is just who he was. He knew me, as you noticed at the time, and I knew him, and he knew that I knew him. That is what made him so hard on me."

"Holy Moses! If I'd known that—"

"Hush, Sam! Don't speak so loud. He is in Gonzalez to-day."

"Are you sure of that, pard? We ought to bounce him, then, and take him in."

"We must, and he is near us right now. Keep quiet, Sam, and notice the tall Mexican outside there."

"You don't mean to say—"

"Yes, I do. That is Col. Double-edge. Take a good look at him, but don't let him find out that we are watching him."

The tall Mexican was not standing quietly in one position.

He changed his attitude occasionally, looking up or down the street, and once he glanced in at the window of the stage office.

"The man is tall for a Mexican," muttered Sam Jones. "His height and shape are like that scoundrel's, and the back view favors him. But the face ain't a bit like him. Your Mexican has a big beard, and real Devil Dick had nothin' o' the kind when I saw him, and he couldn't have grown that one by this time."

"He is made up again," answered Jep. "He fools you now, just as he did when he was fixed to play the part of a red-skin; but he can't fool me. I've been in the theater business, Sam, as well as the circus business, and I ought to know a beard that is put on. That beard has the symptoms mighty strong; but I am going to settle the question."

"What will you do?"

"I will go out there and speak to him, and then I will notice him closely. If I believe then what I suspect now, I will pull that beard off his face. If he should prove to be a Mexican, with an honest beard, there will be nothing to be afraid of, and I shall pass the trick off as a joke."

"If he should prove to be Devil Dick—"

"I shall expect you to back me, Sam, and the two of us ought to be enough for him. There is a reward out, you know."

"I'll back you, pard, to any length; but that galoot, if he is really Devil Dick, or Col. Double-edge, is nothin' short of old Satan himself."

"What of that? We will take him off his guard, and we ought to be able to get the drop on him. Be ready with your shooter, Sam, and I will do the advance work of this show."

"Lead out, then."

"Easy, Sam. We will loaf along toward him and take a good squint at him."

Jephtha Jones led the way out of the stage office, closely followed by his friend.

The Mexican was standing there in the sunshine, leaning against the post to which his horse was hitched, and looking up the street.

Jep stumbled against him as he came out, and the man turned angrily.

Jep spoke to him in Spanish.

"Que quiere usted?" demanded the Mexican, but with an accent that was decidedly not Spanish.

As quick as thought the circus man reached out and seized his heavy black beard.

It came off at once, revealing a face that was

clean shaven with the exception of a big mustache.

It was a strange sight—the little, lean man facing the tall, big one, who looked as if he was able to pick up his small adversary and smash him against a wall.

But the situation lasted scarcely more than a second.

Sam Jones, astonished at the sudden transformation of the Mexican, was betrayed into an incautious exclamation.

"Col. Double-edge!" he cried.

This was enough for the big desperado, who at once perceived that there was a plan to "double-bank" him.

The sudden gleam of a pistol in his hand was followed by an instant flash and report.

Jep Jones fell backward and dropped on the wooden sidewalk.

Col. Double-edge had lifted his bridle-rein from the post, and he mounted the big black horse, before the smoke of his pistol shot had vanished.

Sam Jones, though bewildered by the rapid sequence of startling events, was reasonably cool and prompt in his action.

He was quick enough to draw his revolver and use it; but it missed fire.

Before he could cock it and pull trigger again, the desperado had got a good start, and was galloping down the street.

Twice the stage-driver fired upon him; but the shots were thrown away, and Col. Double-edge went flying out of town.

The three shots and the clattering of the horse's hoofs drew a number of men to the spot, and others came hurrying thither.

"What's the row?" was the repeated inquiry.

"Anybody hurt?"

"Do you see that man?" excitedly demanded Sam Jones as he pointed at the flying figure on the black horse.

"That is Devil Dick—Col. Double-edge—the stage-robber. He has killed my friend here, who found him out. Git onto him, you starin' galoots! Thar he is! Start up and go for him!"

Horses were hitched about the main street of Gonzalez, and all the men within the reach of the driver's voice were armed.

Several of them were speedily mounted, and away they galloped on the hot trail of Devil Dick.

But the desperado already had gained a good start, and his big black horse was a wonder for speed, and he could afford to laugh at his pursuers.

After a short chase they began to return, declaring that the game was beyond their reach.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE UNITED STATES CHIPS IN.

SAM JONES in the mean time had turned his attention to his friend, whom he supposed to have been killed.

But it was not intended that Jep should perish in that way at that time.

The bystanders speedily raised him and sought for the wound that was indicated by the blood on his scalp and brow.

Jep began to gasp and stir, and shortly he opened his eyes and looked about.

"What is the matter?" he feebly demanded.

"Did something hit me?"

He raised his hand to his head, and brought it away covered with blood.

"Something did hit me, but I can't make it out. Reckon it must have knocked me silly."

A flask of potent *aguardiente* was put to his lips, and the fiery liquor quickly coursed through his veins and stimulated his senses.

The stage-driver informed him of what had happened, and lamented the escape of Devil Dick—Col. Double-edge.

"Just my luck," answered Jep. "But I am glad that I am alive. The scoundrel meant to wipe me out; but he shot a trifle too high."

Sam Jones led him as a matter of course into a saloon, where his wound was washed and dressed.

It was then discovered that the desperado's bullet had glanced off his skull, inflicting a scalp wound, and only succeeding in stunning him.

A close call, no doubt, though a miss was as good as a mile, and Jep Jones had another grudge laid up for the ex-Marshall of Sandstone.

In the saloon he learned, much to his satisfaction, that the soldiers had already returned, having been called away by a false alarm, and were again quartered near Gonzalez.

This was good news to the circus man, as it might be expected to insure the safety of his friends at the ranch up the valley.

As soon as he was satisfied that his skull had not been fractured, though his head still pained him and he felt a little dazed, he mounted his horse and rode out to the barracks, which were located in some old adobe buildings at the distance of half a mile from Gonzalez.

There he found Lieut. Cripps, the commandant of the post and the leader of the two dozen blue-coats who represented the power of the United States at that point.

The lieutenant was a young man who had gained his position by brilliant service during

the great civil war, and was fond of his profession and devoted to his duty.

As Jep Jones found him there, seated at a rude table, employed in preparing a report of his recent expedition, he might have been mistaken for a ranchman or a cowboy.

His face was bronzed until it was nearly as dark as an Indian's and his dress was of plain and rude material, the only thing about him to indicate his rank or occupation being a pair of shoulder-straps that were tacked to his blue flannel shirt.

The circus man hastened to tell his business, describing the raid of the cattle men upon the Throop Ranch up the valley and the discomfiture of the raiders.

Then he related his experience in Gonzalez that morning, which resulted in the exposure of Devil Dick and the flight of that desperado.

Lieut. Cripps, who was highly indignant, at once ordered his horse to be saddled, and began to don his fatigue uniform.

"I will attend to that matter at once," said he. "Not the stage-robber business, though. That belongs to the authorities of Gonzalez or of the Territory. As the rascal has more than once meddled with the mails, I will capture him if he comes in my way, or will help the folks here if they want my help. But they prefer to manage their affairs in their own way, and I shall not interfere unless I am called upon."

"I suppose it is the conduct of the cattle men that you mean to look into," suggested Jep.

"Just that. It is my duty to protect the settlers on Government lands, and I mean to protect them against white robbers as well as red ones. The white men nowadays are getting to be worse than the Indians, and they need more watching. I sent a word of caution to that man Koopman, but he has not heeded it, and now I shall go to him and give him his orders."

"Will you go alone?" inquired Jep.

"Of course I will. Do you suppose I want an army?"

"Jack Koopman has a desperate set about him, though yesterday's experience may have cooled them off a bit."

"I have no fear that he will consider it safe to play any of his pranks with me. Besides, my men have had a hard ride, and they need rest."

"Don't you need any rest?"

"Not when those people up the valley need to be protected. You may tell them, my friend, that they may make themselves easy. I'm off."

Lieutenant Cripps mounted his horse and rode away alone, leaving Jephtha Jones staring in respectful admiration after a brave and active though poorly rewarded servant of the Government, who sought duty instead of shirking it, who attended to his business without the use of any red tape routine, and who shunned no peril or fatigue in doing what he believed ought to be done.

Satisfied that the interests of his friends were safe in the hands of such a guardian, the circus man rode at his leisure back to the ranch, where he related his adventure at Gonzalez and his interview with the officer.

While his assurances caused his friends to hope that they would be safe from further raids by the cattle men, they were surprised and troubled by the audacity displayed by Col. Double-edge in presenting himself at Gonzalez so soon after his late lawless performances.

It was true that he had been disguised, but his ability to assume a disguise was another proof of the dangerous character of the man.

"If I ever," said Jep, "had the least doubt about who that scoundrel really is, I have no longer any doubt. The stage-driver recognized him at once as Devil Dick, or Col. Double-edge, and I am sure that he is Jim Sartine, who was Marshal of Sandstone when I was there."

"I suppose you must be right," observed Walter Brandis. "I have had a bit of news since you left here this morning. A man from the Sandstone region passed by the ranch this morning, looking for some land to locate a warrant on. He told me that they have had another election at Sandstone. Jim Sartine ran for marshal again, and was defeated."

"That accounts for his presence here, Walter. He has come back to Arizona to go into his old business."

"Well, I hope he will let us alone."

"I hope so, too, but am afraid he won't. The United States of America will protect us against Jack Koopman and his crew; but who will protect us against Devil Dick and his gang?"

"We must protect ourselves," interposed George Throop, who had become quite lively since he learned that his wound was not a dangerous one.

"We must protect ourselves by carrying the war into Africa and going for the scalp of Mr. Devil Dick, the two-edged colonel. Just wait till I get well, and then something will be done."

The United States of America, in the mean time, as represented by Lieutenant Cripps, had made as nearly as possible a bee-line for Jack Koopman's extensive cattle-ranch.

Charley Cripps was a good rider, and he had a good horse under him, and he was anxious to get at his business and finish it.

Consequently he made a quick journey to the abode of the prosperous and grasping cattle baron, whom he found at home.

Jack was a large man of middle age, not tall, but very broad, with a low brow, a fat and sensual face, and small eyes that sparkled with cunning and avarice.

He boasted of large possessions in land and cattle, had an exalted idea of his own importance, and was strong in the belief that nothing that stood in his way should be permitted to exist.

His visitor dismounted and introduced himself as Lieutenant Cripps, of the United States cavalry service.

Koopman did not receive him any too graciously, but asked him to take a seat and have something to drink.

The lieutenant declined the latter invitation—he had not come there to be entertained—and dashed at once into his business.

"I sent you word a while ago," said he, "that you must keep on your own range and quit interfering with the ranchmen about here."

"I believe I did get some message of that kind," superciliously answered Koopman.

"I am sure you got it, Mr. Koopman, but you seem to have forgotten it or disregarded it. You went to the Throop ranch in the valley yesterday, and had trouble with the settlers there."

"So, you've got hold of that already. Well, yes; I had a little difficulty down there. I claim that land, you see."

"I would not be surprised to hear that you claimed the earth. But you know that you had no right to the land and no business in it."

"I claimed that land, as I said," insisted Koopman. "I warned these people to get away from it; but they didn't go. Then I went down there to drive them off."

"And got yourself driven off by a few good men with rifles. The effort was such a costly one that I fancy you will not care to repeat it."

"Won't I, though? You had better not be too sure of that. I will wipe those squatters out when I get ready."

"You had better not get ready, then. You will not be allowed to play that game again."

"Who says so?" fiercely demanded Jack Koopman.

"I say so," quietly answered the officer.

"And who are you?"

"As I have already informed you, I am Lieutenant Cripps of the cavalry, commanding the post at Gonzalez."

"What do you amount to, anyhow?"

"Not much, as far as I am personally concerned, and my command is a very small one; but in this business I represent the Government of the United States, and back of me are fifty millions of people, more or less. It won't do to fool with that crowd."

The cattle baron was silent and sullen for a few minutes, occupying himself only in sampling his own whisky.

"Any more orders?" he then inquired with a sneer.

"No orders," answered the officer, "but a little advice."

"Spit it out, then."

"One of the men who were with you when you made your attack on the Throop Ranch was the notorious desperado and stage-robber, known as Devil Dick, or Col. Double-edge. I presume that you hired him to help you in that job."

"Well, what if I did?"

"I would advise you not to employ such a man for any purpose."

"You are a little too fresh with your advice, young man. I suppose the man you speak of is Dick March. I have never hired him to rob stages, and if he is up to those games it is none of my business. I employ the best men I can get hold of for my purposes, and take them as I find them."

"You may not have hired him for stage-robbery," observed the officer, "but you have put him to even a worse use. The fact is, Mr. Koopman, you have crossed the line of the law pretty often, and some day you may go too far. It won't be safe for you to hire or harbor such a man as this Double-edge Dick, and you had better drop him. It is no affair of mine to hunt stage-robbers, as a general thing; but you know as well as I do that the people of these parts are sore on that subject, and they may take it into their heads to worry you, and they will do it if you continue to harbor a public nuisance."

"That is my lookout, young man, and it is none of your affair, as you say. I don't thank you for your officiousness, and have had enough of your jaw."

"Very well. I have given you fair warning, and that is all I came here to do."

Lieutenant Cripps rode away, pretty well satisfied with the result of his mission, notwithstanding his extremely ungracious treatment by the cattle baron.

He had no doubt that his words would be remembered, and that the effect would be salutary.

CHAPTER XVIII.

COLONEL DOUBLE-EDGE'S PARD.

THE desperado, whatever his real name may have been, rode swiftly away from Gonzalez after Jep Jones had exposed him by stripping off his disguise.

He had no fear of being captured by any of his tardy pursuers, as the black horse that bore him was a wonder for speed and endurance.

But he did not slacken his gait until he had distanced them all completely, and the last one of them had turned back from the pursuit.

Then he rode more slowly, turning once in his saddle to look back in the direction of Gonzalez and to shake his fist savagely toward that quarter of the globe.

He rode on until he came to a region of sand and rock, where scarcely any vegetation greeted the eyes of tired travelers—a region that had united with other such in giving the Territory its name of Arizona, the Arid Zone.

It was near nightfall when he reached the worst part of this region, where the bare and forbidding rocks towered upward until they terminated in a vast mesa, or piece of tableland, seamed in all directions by deep rifts and canyons.

This sort of formation, though it may be highly interesting to geologists, is more singular than pleasant, more peculiar than picturesque.

Into one of the canyons Devil Dick rode, his course gradually tending upward, and before long he came to signs of water and grass and infrequent foliage.

While Dick was crossing the plain a man was seated at the edge of the mesa, looking westward and downward at the man and horse as they plodded through the sandy desert.

This man had a good field-glass, with which he closely watched the solitary traveler for half an hour or so.

"It is Dick," he said, at last. "But he don't look as he did when he went away."

He arose quickly, and hurried across the mesa, until he came to a break, by which he began to descend into the canyon.

Devil Dick continued his course slowly, and finally drew rein at a place where the canyon spread out a little, forming something like a basin.

Here was a spring or pool of water, with quite an abundance of green grass and trees.

Against the rock was a rude hut, and a horse was grazing near by, and there were other evidences of a permanent camp.

The rider dismounted, unsaddled his horse, and turned him loose to graze with the other.

Then he looked about as if expecting to see somebody, but no person was visible.

He went to the hut and looked in, but there was nobody there.

"Wonder what's become of Ben Hillman," he muttered. "There's his horse, though, and he can't be far away."

There was a rattle of stones and rubbish from the rock, and the man who had been seated at the edge of the mesa leaped down.

He was evidently younger than the other, not so tall, and of a much lighter build; but there was a suggestion of strength combined with agility in his lithe frame, and he had the action and air of an athlete.

The only peculiarity about him was his clothes, which were of fine quality and cut—the dress of a city dandy, in fact—though they were badly worn and discolored by rough service.

He wore them, however, with the air of a dandy, and his field-glass was slung by a strap from his right shoulder, after the manner of a tourist.

"You are back early, colonel," he said, as he alighted. "I had not expected you so soon."

"No more had I expected myself so soon," answered the other. "Where were you, Ben?"

"I got lonesome, and went up yonder to look for you. I missed something when I saw you, and have been wondering if you have had any trouble. You don't look as you did when you went away. Where is your beard? Was the weather too hot to wear it?"

"Hot? I should say hot. It was something worse than hot weather. But I am as hungry as a wolf, Ben, hungry enough to eat a boiled owl. Let us get some grub, and then I will tell you all about it."

"Sit down and rest, and it will soon be ready for you," answered Hillman.

He stirred up a fire at the end of the hut, manipulated a few rude cooking utensils with wonderful dexterity, and in a few minutes spread before his companion a smoking hot supper of meat and coffee and hard bread.

"I have made a botch of it, Ben," said Dick March, when he had taken off the edge of his appetite. "But it was no fault of mine."

"I hope you found out when the money was to be sent away," suggested the other.

"That is just what I failed to find out. I hung about the stage and express-office, and would have done all I wanted to do if it hadn't been for that circus man."

"The one we teased at Chiapa Pass?"

"That same infernal scalawag. I saw him go into the office, and thought myself safe; but it seems that he had eyes like a hawk. He came out after a while with the driver of that same

stage, and walked up to me as peert as you please, and jerked my beard right off."

"He had grit, anyhow."

"I wouldn't have believed it of him. The stage-driver knew me at once, and the jig was up. But I settled the case of that meddlesome fool with a bullet from my pistol, and was on my horse and away as quick as you could wink. The stage driver pulled on me twice, and a lot of galoots jumped on their horses and lit out after me; but Black Bob showed them his heels easy enough."

"Are you sure that you saved the circus man?"

"Don't see how I could help it. He was right under my nose, and I bored a hole through the top of his head."

"Well, colonel, it is a great pity."

"Yes, we have lost a good chance to rake in a pile, and I won't be able to play that beard on them again; but it's a consolation to know that I wiped out that scalawag of a circus man."

Afterward, when they were smoking their pipes preparatory to their nightly snooze, the subject was brought up again.

"We must make a break in some direction, Dick," observed Ben Hillman, "or give up this business as too slow and uncertain. It don't work to suit me as it is."

"It is better for you than working with a convict gang in Texas," sneered Col. Double-edge.

"Anything would be better than that, and I can think of many things that would be better than this. The fact is, pard, that we are not earning our salt. We got nothing to speak of from the stage we stopped at Chiapa Pass, and you were fool enough to risk your life and help Jack Koopman in that last affair of his for nothing but glory."

"For spite, you had better say," objected Dick.

"That's about as bad. Nothing came of it, anyhow, and something has got to be done to make something come. We need provisions and ammunition, and money above all, and somebody has got to furnish them. Suppose we strike Jack Koopman again?"

"For what?"

"For a paying job?"

"What sort of a job?"

"The job that he failed to do yesterday. You know that he is dead crazy to get the settlers off that ranch, like that what-d'ye-call-him who wanted the other fellow's vineyard. Confound it! how a man does forget that Bible stuff when he is knocking about!"

"Never mind the Bible stuff, Ben. Do you propose to take contract to do that job for Koopman?"

"That is the idea, my friend. I think the job can be done, and I am sure that he will be willing to pay well for it. It will be easy to try."

"Very well. We will go and visit the fat spider. We will get something out of him anyhow."

The next morning the two partners in villainy left the canyon and rode to the Koopman Ranch, where they were welcomed by the proprietor much more graciously than he had received his visitor of the previous day.

The cattle baron set liquors and cigars before them, and ordered a substantial lunch for them, and treated them, in fact, to the best the ranch afforded.

"I suppose I ought to drive you away from here, Double-edge," he observed. "If I had obeyed orders, I would have done so as soon as you came in sight."

"What orders?" inquired the desperado.

"The orders of the United States of America, as given by that seven-by-nine officer who keeps a few cheap soldiers in his corral at Gonzalez. He was out here yesterday and took pains to tell me that I would get into trouble if I should hire or harbor you any more."

"The man is a fool," sneered Dick. "Does he suppose anybody cares for him and his measly squad of scalawags? I don't believe he scared you much."

"Not he, and I am not a man who is likely to go back on his friends, anyhow. While he was here he favored me with another order."

"What was that?"

"He came here to give me a raking over about my little difficulty with those settlers in the valley. He told me that I must be a good boy and not do so any more. In fact, he ordered me to leave them alone, under penalty of being pitched into by fifty million people, more or less."

"The man must be a bag of wind. Well, Jack, did he succeed in scaring you away from that trail?"

"Hardly. I don't scare quite so easy as that. But I must confess, Dick, that I have my doubts about following it up any further."

"Why's that?"

"My last spree was such a costly one that I don't feel like tackling those squatters again. They can't be scared, and I am almost ready to believe that they are bullet-proof. Perhaps it would be best for me to obey the orders of the man with shoulder-straps."

This was Col. Double-edge's opportunity, and he proceeded to open up the business that had brought him and his partner there.

"That is what we came to speak to you about," said he. "We thought that you might feel a sort of a—"

"Delicacy," suggested Hillman.

"Yes, a sort of a delicacy about proceeding any further in that business, and that you might be willing to have somebody take it off your hands. My friend here, Ben Hillman, thinks that it might be worth your while to give us the contract."

"What could you do more than I have done or could do?" inquired the cattle baron.

"Ben has a little scheme that he thinks might be made to work."

"What is it, then?" demanded Koopman, turning to Ben Hillman.

"What's the matter with fire?" was the quiet reply.

This proposition, dropping so mildly from the lips of a man whose appearance certainly did not indicate extreme bloodthirstiness, astonished even Jack Koopman by its cold-blooded savagery.

"Would you do that?" he asked. "Would you burn them in their beds at night?"

"Well, there might be some accident of that sort," coolly answered Hillman; "but we wouldn't mean it, you know. Of course the work would have to be done at night, and if any of them should happen to get warmed up a little too much, why, serve them right for having no better luck."

There was further talk about the "business," and the two partners were convinced, as Koopman gradually became reconciled to the idea, that he had fastened on it as soon as it was broached.

"We are needing provisions and ammunition, and are yet more in need of money," observed Ben Hillman.

The details of the contract were easily arranged, and when the contractors returned to their camp, they were loaded with necessities.

They also brought away from the cattle-ranch some money and the promise of a bigger pile.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN INFAMOUS ATTEMPT.

CHINQUAPIN had a secret.

He kept it remarkably well, and it was to him a source of continual pleasure and pride.

It was not for nothing that he had been roaming about the country in the vicinity of Gonzalez without seeking or caring for any regular employment.

He had an object, and the object was a girl, and the girl was his sister.

When he escaped from Indian captivity, he had brought Zarita away with him, carrying the little toddler a great distance, and sacrificing himself in every way to care for her.

When he had reached a place of safety on the verge of civilization, the boy built a rude hut, in which he housed her, and bestirred himself to seek sustenance for both of them.

In this he succeeded fairly well, though they had their days of famine as well as those of feasting, and as he grew older and stouter, he housed her more comfortably, and provided for her more regularly and abundantly.

Thus they grew up together, and Zarita, who showed her Mexican origin more plainly than Chinquapin, adored her big brother, and knew no person in the world but him.

Although Chinquapin was often absent for days at a time, she was never lonesome, but patiently awaited his return, caring for him only, and trusting in him entirely.

He kept her existence a secret from everybody.

His secret was a sacred thing to him, and he feared that if she should be seen and known of men, some person would take her away from him.

In this he was justified, as Zarita had grown to be a very handsome girl—a woman, in fact—and she would not be safe in a region where the law of the strong arm prevailed.

But he had grown so fond of his new friends at the Throop Ranch, and believed in them so thoroughly, that he confided his secret to Jep Jones and Etta Throop.

He was strongly advised by both of them to bring Zarita to the ranch, where she would be well cared for and kindly treated, and Etta knew that she would be glad to have the girl as a companion.

Chinquapin promised to do so; but before he could go for her, something happened to prevent the fulfillment of his promise.

Ike Sanders, one of Jep Jones's circus assistants, having a holiday and money to spend, went to Gonzalez to enjoy himself.

He enjoyed himself so well, that it was late at night when he returned to the ranch.

He rode up quietly, and went to the circus sheds, which were at a little distance from the house, where he unsaddled and fed his horse.

As he stepped out to go to his bed—he slept in one of the sheds with his mates—he became suddenly aware of a bright light.

Looking toward the house, in which slept the

Throops and Jep Jones and Walter Brandis, he saw that it was on fire at the end, and that the fire had gained considerable headway.

He ran down there as fast as his legs would carry him, shouting an alarm as he went.

As he ran he saw two men standing near the fire, and in the light the figures and faces of both of them were plainly visible.

Ike Sanders knew that neither of them was an inmate of the house, and was sure that one of them was a man who had come there before for no good purpose.

He had only his revolver with him, but did not hesitate to bring that into use immediately.

The two men started and ran as soon as they heard his cry, and he fired at them again and again, but seemingly without effect.

In a few minutes the galloping of horses told him that they were out of his reach and in full flight.

The shouts and shots had instantly aroused the sleepers in the house, and Jep Jones and Walter Brandis ran out to see what was the matter.

The blazing fire told them much, and Ike Sanders told them more.

"Two scoundrels have set fire to the house," he said. "I fired at them, but they got away."

The distant galloping of horses confirmed this statement.

There was no time for any further explanations, and no chance to pursue the incendiaries, as the fire demanded all the efforts of the men.

It had been well started, and had caught so effectually that the entire end of the house was already in a blaze.

The light and dry wood burned like tinder, and water was a scarce commodity.

It was at once evident that it would be impossible to extinguish the flames, and that all efforts must be devoted to saving the contents of the building.

Ike Sanders's mates had also been awakened, and the sight of the fire gave wings to their feet as they hurried down the slope.

Etta was of course awake and out, as cool and active as anybody.

George Throop was first carried out on his cot, and was taken to a place of safety.

Then all devoted themselves to the task of saving as much of their property as it was possible to save.

Many hands made quick work, and nearly everything of value was removed from the burning building, in spite of the rapid ravages of the flames.

Then they watched the speedy destruction of the tenement, while Ike Sanders gave such further particulars of his discovery as he had not yet related.

Those particulars, though few, were important and startling.

"I knew one of the scamps who did that trick," declared Ike. "It was Colonel Double-edge."

This statement caused an immediate and unpleasant sensation.

"Are you sure?" demanded Jep Jones.

Ike was positive.

"I saw his face as plain as I see yours now. It was the same tall and dark man who jerked you out from behind the woodpile when we had the fight here. If that man was Dick March, then it was Devil Dick who tried to burn your folks in your beds, the real Colonel Double-edge."

The man who was with the desperado was a stranger to Ike Sanders, who described him as younger and of slighter build than his companion, and was sure that he would recognize him if he should ever see him again.

This information settled the source as well as the nature of the infernal attempt upon the ranch.

It was not doubted that the incendiaries had meant to fire the sheds and outbuildings as well as the house, and that they would have succeeded in their evil intention if they had not been interrupted by the arrival of Ike Sanders.

"I have been of the opinion that there was no good in Gonzalez whisky," observed Jep; "but it has done us a service this time by keeping Ike away until just when he was wanted. If he had come in an hour sooner, he would have gone sound asleep, and we would all have been food for the flames."

The infamous purpose of the incendiaries was abundantly evidenced by the fact that they had first set fire to the house which was known to be occupied by the people of the ranch.

It was a question whether Devil Dick had been employed by Jack Koopman, or had done the dastardly deed of his own motion and to satisfy his own spite.

The former supposition was probable, and the latter was possible enough.

In any event it was apparent that the desperado was an enemy to be dreaded, and that persons and property would not be safe on the ranch while he was alive and in the vicinity.

Therefore he must be hunted down and caught, if his capture should prove to be within the range of possibilities.

But nothing could be done that night, as it would be impossible to follow the trail of the scoundrels before morning.

CHAPTER XX.

"AND THEY EVEN KILLED HER!"

THE first thing necessary was to put Etta Throop in a place of safety, together with her brother George, who was slowly recovering from his wound, but was yet quite helpless.

Chinquapin was mounted on a good horse, and was sent to Gonzalez to procure a wagon in which George Throop could be suitably transported to that town.

He was also instructed to report the occurrence of the night to Lieut. Cripps.

The others busied themselves in storing in one of the circus sheds the property that had been saved from the burning building, in preparing quarters for themselves and in attending to the comfort of George and Etta Throop.

In the morning Chinquapin returned to the ranch, bringing a spring wagon and a driver.

With him came Lieut. Cripps and two of his men, one of whom was reputed to be an excellent trailer.

The arrival of the cavalry officer was not altogether agreeable to one person in the party, and that person was Walter Brandis.

Lieut. Cripps had visited the ranch shortly after his interview with Jack Koopman, had seen Etta Throop there, had been invited to come again, and had very cheerfully promised to do so.

It was evident that he had hastened to avail himself of the first opportunity to keep that promise.

This display of alacrity was somewhat displeasing to young Brandis, who had fastened upon Etta as his own property, and was already beginning to be jealous of the cavalry officer.

He had not taken any steps to secure or assert his claim; but he considered the the young lady his by right of discovery, and had not seriously regarded the possibility of outside interference.

The appearance of Lieut. Cripps on the scene awoke in him a sense of the insecurity of his position, making it evident that he must speak and act for himself if he meant to gain the prize.

Just then, however, the question was which of them would serve her best when her person and property needed protection.

Both were equally eager, and the cavalry officer speedily made the fact manifest that he had come there for business purposes only.

George Throop was laid in the wagon on the best mattress that had been saved from the burned house, protected as well as possible from jolting by blankets and pillows, and he and his sister were sent off to Gonzalez in charge of the driver and one of the circus men.

Two others of Jep Jones's assistants were detailed to take care of the ranch, and the rest started in pursuit of the incendiaries, led by the trailer from the cavalry command.

The discovery was soon made that the trail was an easy one to follow at the start, as it was spotted rather plentifully with blood.

It was clear that one of the shot fired by Ike Sanders had counted; but there was no telling at the start whether it had struck a man or a horse.

This doubt was settled when the blood disappeared from the trail, as a man's wound would be bound up, while that of a horse would be let alone.

One of the men had been hit; but it was supposed that he was not seriously injured, as the two horses had traveled rapidly, not slowing up until they were at least three miles away from the Throop Ranch.

Then the trail ran up into the hills and became more difficult to follow, though the trailer who had been brought by Lieut. Cripps, proved himself a good guesser by crossing the blind places, and seldom failing to strike it beyond them.

As the party threaded ravines and mounted ridges, gradually nearing the high and dry region, Chinquapin became restless and uneasy, looking anxiously ahead, and frequently riding so far in advance of his companions, that it was necessary to restrain him.

His agitation became so manifest that Jep Jones asked him what was troubling him.

"I am afraid," answered the lad.

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid for Zarita, my sister. This trail is taking us straight to her, or straight to the place where she ought to be. If they have found her—"

He could not finish the sentence. The supposition was too terrible. If those desperadoes had found that solitary and defenseless girl, her fate was beyond the power of words to express.

Jep Jones was silent. He could offer the poor lad no consolation, as the same fear had struck a chill to his heart.

The trail passed over a ridge, and descended into a deep but lovely little valley.

As the party raised the crest of the ridge, they saw in the valley a solitary hut.

It was an evidence of human occupation, but there was no sign of human life about it.

Chinquapin pointed at it with a trembling hand.

"There it is," he said, hesitatingly. "That is the place—where Zarita—was."

He tottered on his horse, and his friend seized

and steadied him while the others rode down to the hut.

Before Jep Jones and Chinquapin had got down there, Lieut. Cripps and Walter Brandis had entered the frail tenement and came out of it, and their faces told the story.

No explanations were asked, and none were given, as they were not needed.

Chinquapin straightened himself up on his horse and clutched his rifle, his dark face darker than ever.

"She is gone!" he cried, hoarsely. "They've got her! Come on!"

He took the lead of the party, and from that moment he kept it.

He picked up the trail at once, and followed it so surely and swiftly that the noted trailer of the cavalry command yielded his place to the lad and dropped in behind him.

Whether the trail was plain or blind, Chinquapin followed it unerringly, and as if by instinct, until the party reached a spot where the incendiaries had made a temporary camp.

The remains of a small fire were there, but the ashes were cold, and it was clear that the pursuers were a long way behind the men they were seeking.

The leaders were anxious to press forward, believing that there was nothing to be gained by a longer stay at the deserted camp; but they were obliged to wait for Chinquapin, who had dismounted to look for traces of his sister.

His sharp eyes soon showed him what he sought, and he followed the trail until it led him to a gully at a little distance from where the fire had been made.

A wild and piercing cry told his comrades of a terrible discovery, and they hastened to him.

In the bottom of the gully, a wretched heap, shockingly bruised and mangled, lay the body of Zarita.

An examination showed livid marks on her brown throat, which proved that she had been strangled to death.

Whether the strangling had been intentional, or merely an incident of worse brutality, it was certain that the scoundrels had murdered her, and after her death had thrown her into the gully, leaving her there to the beasts and birds of prey.

While the body of Zarita was carefully lifted by strong arms and tenderly brought up to the level ground, her brother knelt at the edge of the ravine, and hot tears fell from his eyes like rain.

"And they even killed her!" he moaned.

CHAPTER XXI.

LOSING AND FINDING A TRAIL.

WALTER BRANDIS and Jephtha Jones wished to place the body of Chinquapin's sister on a horse and carry it back to the ranch for proper burial, but the lad insisted that she should be laid where she had lost her life.

Her brief existence had been lonely and destitute of all the joys and comforts of the settlements, and in her death there was nothing that civilization could give her.

So she was buried where she died, and a pile of stones both marked and protected her grave.

When this task was completed, Chinquapin mounted his horse and rode on without casting a backward glance at that pile of stone.

He was then as hard and stoical as an Indian, seated as firmly in his saddle as if there had been nothing to move him, and again he picked up the trail and led the party rapidly forward.

Over and through the hills they went, descending them to a broad, sandy plain, where the trail was nearly as easy to follow as if it had been written in fresh snow.

They crossed the plain and entered a canyon, where they found not one trail only, but many.

The tracks were new and old, going into the canyon and coming out of it, from end toward various directions, so mingled that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to pick out and follow any one trail.

Convinced that they had found the resort or hiding-place of the desperadoes, they pushed forward as rapidly as the nature of the ground would allow, until they came to the spot where Devil Dick and Ben Hillman had built their hut and made their camp.

They had reached the end of their chase—there could be no doubt of that.

There was the hut which must be the shelter of the villains they were seeking.

Yet it was necessary to be cautious, as Devil Dick was known to have been the leader of a gang, and it was more than possible that they might stumble upon a nest of hornets.

Therefore they dismounted silently, tethered their horses, and approached the hut with their rifles ready for immediate work.

There was, however, no sign of life about the rude little cabin at the base of the rock, and no horses but their own were visible.

It began to look as if the desperadoes had decamped, and this was soon discovered to be the fact.

Possibly troubled by a painful remembrance of their latest crime, and probably fearing a successful pursuit, they had taken the small

amount of property which they had stored at that resort, and had left for parts unknown.

A close inspection of the premises revealed the fact that they had lately been there, and there were also indications of a hasty departure.

It was then so near dark that the pursuing party could do nothing but camp where they were and wait for morning.

They kept a good watch, as it was possible that Devil Dick or some of his friends might put in an appearance during the night; but nothing occurred to disturb them, and they were forced to the conclusion that the desperadoes had got beyond the reach of their pursuit.

In the morning it became evident that it would be useless for them to attempt to take up the trail again, as it was impossible to fix upon it with any degree of certainty.

It was supposed that their game had returned down the canyon, as there was no other visible chance for them to get away; but there was no telling what direction they had taken after they reached the plains.

So the party abandoned the pursuit and sadly returned to the Throop Ranch, whence part of them went on to Gonzalez, and the rest remained at the ranch to look after the property that was left there.

To the people of Gonzalez and the region thereabout, few if any crimes could seem more dastardly and diabolical than the latest outrage committed by Devil Dick and his partner.

Arson and murder are always bad enough, but these were arson and murder of the worst and meanest description.

An attempt to burn in their beds a wounded man and a woman had been followed by the foul ill-treatment, and subsequent murder of a helpless girl.

It was true that the attempt at arson had fortunately failed, and that the murdered girl was a Mexican with a possible taint of Indian blood; but nobody would be safe from fiends who could do such cowardly and diabolical deeds.

Besides, Devil Dick was a notorious marauder who deserved killing, and it was to everybody's interest to hunt him down and make an end of him.

Therefore the people turned out with alacrity and with the intention of capturing the desperadoes or driving them from the Territory.

The latter part of the plan is what they succeeded in—if Devil Dick and his partner had not previously taken the hint and got away of their own accord.

Some of the best men in that region were in the hunt with Walter Brandis and Jephtha Jones, and Lieut. Cripps with his squad of cavalry rendered most efficient service; but the fugitives could not be found, though the Territory was scoured almost from end to end, and all probable or possible hiding-places were duly searched.

After long and faithful effort the searchers were convinced that the two desperadoes had sought safety by taking themselves to a long distance from the scene of their recent operations.

When the hunt had been finally abandoned, Jap Jones and his friend returned to the ranch in the Gonzalez valley, for the purpose of again building up the twice-ruined homestead of the Throop family.

"The third time is the charm," was the way the circus man put it, and Brandis concurred with Lieut. Cripps in the opinion that George Throop and his sister would not be likely to be molested again, as the chief marauders had left the country and Jack Koopman had been scared into decency.

So they hurried up the house, making it a better building than the last, and soon had it ready for occupancy.

It is possible that the young engineer may have had a selfish motive in this work, wishing to get Etta Throop away from the vicinity of the cavalry officer, who was stationed near Gonzalez and could see her every day.

The young lady and her brother were brought back to the ranch, and were highly pleased with the new home that had been prepared for them.

Etta, who was very bright and gay on her return, feared no possible hardship or peril. In fact, it must be confessed that she would have really enjoyed the exciting scenes through which she had passed had it not been that her brother had suffered so seriously.

George's recovery had been slower than his friends had hoped it would be, and he was still an invalid when he returned to the ranch.

In Chinquapin there had been quite a change since the death of Zarita.

Though he was still willing, obedient and anxious to please his new friends, and especially Etta, he had sullen and moody spells, during which it was believed to be best to let him alone for a while.

Nobody asked him what was the matter, as all knew well enough that he was brooding over the murder of his sister and longing for revenge.

Finding Etta Throop in a right good humor, Walter Brandis was decidedly of the opinion that he ought to improve his chances and secure

her for himself if he could; but he was naturally inclined to be timid in that enterprise, though bold enough in other matters.

He postponed his supreme effort until something occurred that set both his mind and body at work in another direction.

Again there was an arrival from Texas, and from the neighborhood of Sandstone.

The partner of the man who had brought the information concerning Jim Sartine's loss of his position as Marshal of Sandstone stopped at the ranch on his way to join his friend, who had located some land not far to the westward of the Gonzalez valley.

He brought some news that excited the people at the ranch and changed their plans.

The news was, in brief, that Jim Sartine had returned to Sandstone, where his many friends had gathered around him and given him a warm welcome.

This information caused a general stir, and specially aroused Jephtha Jones.

"It is a good thing," said he, "that we have got our work here finished in time to leave us free to do something else."

"To do what?" inquired Brandis.

"To go to Sandstone and get that scoundrel."

"Are you crazy, Jep? Do you suppose that we could take him out from among his friends there?"

"It won't be us who will have to take him. All we will have to do will be to set the law at work. We will get a requisition on the Governor of Texas, and the State of Texas is a bigger man than Jim Sartine, or ought to be. When we get hold of him, I am keen to bet that we can keep him."

After a consultation with the leading citizens of Gonzalez, it was decided that this was the very thing that ought to be done.

A requisition was easily obtained, and Jephtha Jones and Walter Brandis were authorized as special officers to carry it to Texas and secure its enforcement.

George Throop and Chinquapin were anxious to accompany them; but the former was yet too weak for such work, and Jep Jones was decidedly of the opinion that under the circumstances the latter could not be trusted on service that called for patience and coolness and discretion.

Before they started Walter Brandis had a friendly interview with Lieut. Cripps, in which he touched upon a delicate subject.

"It seems to me," he observed, "that you have taken quite a fancy to Miss Throop."

Cripps did not deny the imputation.

"My fancy is an older one than yours," continued Walter; "but I don't claim that the age of it gives me any better right than you have. I only want to tell you fairly where I stand, and to say that as I am going down into Texas after her father's murderer—possibly a dangerous errand—I shall rely upon you to take no advantage of me in that quarter while I am away."

"You may depend on me for that," answered the cavalry officer. "Your chances have been more and better than mine, and it is not my fault if you haven't improved them; but I will make no move while you are away. I only wish that my duties would let me go with you."

On this fair understanding the two young men shook hands.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"WE ARREST YOU."

THE information brought to the Throop Ranch was accurate, and it sufficiently covered the main facts of the case.

Jim Sartine had returned to Sandstone directly after the commission of his last act of villainy.

He and his partner left Arizona together; but Ben Hillman did not accompany him to the Texas town in which he meant to take refuge.

"Just wait till I see how things are working down at Sandstone," was Sartine's advice to his friend. "If I catch on lively there, and strike a streak of luck, I will send word to you, and you can come and share it with me."

"Never mind me, old man," answered Hillman. "I know where I can run to cover and be safe enough for awhile. We had better both lie low until the storm up yonder blows over. Then we can go back and stir things up again."

Jim Sartine could not have asked a better reception than he got at Sandstone.

His old friends there, who had always believed in him, believed in him more than ever, and were ready to "go their length" to serve him by giving him position and pay.

His friends, indeed, had become more numerous and enthusiastic, because the administration of the important office of marshal by Sam Sholes had been far from satisfactory.

It was believed that the proprietor of the "Onward" Saloon was strongly disposed to favor the disorderly classes, who had largely aided his election, and whose triumph had resulted in his victory.

Sandstone was not what it had been when Jim Sartine was in command.

Nobody was afraid of Sam Sholes, the roughs and rustlers held high carnival, peaceable citizens were forced to the wall, and life and property were no longer considered reasonably safe.

It was no wonder, therefore, that Jim Sar-

tine's friends were rejoiced at his return, and that they were ready to do everything in their power to retain him as a permanent citizen of Sandstone.

It was true that he would not for some time be able to serve them in the position which he had previously occupied, as several months must elapse before the expiration of the term for which Sam Sholes had been elected; but at the end of that term they had no doubt that Jim Sartine might again become Marshal of Sandstone.

In the mean time a number of the leading business men clubbed together and made up a fund which was to be employed in securing the ex-marshal in a sort of semi-official position as a private watchman and detective.

He acquiesced in this arrangement rather as a matter of favor to his friends than otherwise, and performed the duties assigned to him faithfully and efficiently, fully maintaining his previous high character for energy and discretion.

Shortly before his return some ugly stories concerning him had gained circulation in certain quarters.

It was whispered about that he was by no means the law-abiding citizen that he had been generally believed to be.

His periodical absences from Sandstone, according to these rumors, had been employed in committing depredations of the most abominable character in a neighboring Territory.

The scene of his reported misdeeds was variously located in New Mexico and in Arizona.

Some of the whispers went so far as to accuse him of being identical with a desperado known as Devil Dick, who had made himself notorious by stage robberies and murders in the latter Territory.

It is almost needless to say that the friends of the ex-marshal treated these reports with the most utter contempt.

They declared them to be weak inventions of the enemy, set afloat by the disorderly element for the purpose of injuring the character of an efficient officer.

It was only necessary in their opinion to point to Jim Sartine's stainless record as a sufficient refutation of the vile slanders.

They declared it to be simply impossible that a man could be in one locality such a model administrator of the law and such a careful protector of life and property, and in another locality such a lawless and bloodthirsty villain.

The rumors continued to spread after his return, and in some respects they increased and became more definite.

Necessarily they were brought to his notice, and he did not hesitate to stigmatize them as mean and cowardly lies.

It was only his strict regard for the law, together with the persuasions of his friends, that prevented him from hunting down the slanders and punishing those who dared to give them currency.

He admitted that during his sojourn in New Mexico he had been compelled to deal very vigorously with a gang of Mexican and other robbers with whom he had come in collision.

He was guarding some treasure there when this gang made a raid upon it for the purpose of robbery, and he had used them up severely, leaving more of them on the ground than got away.

The survivors and their friends naturally hated him on that account, and with the view of getting even with him had put in circulation the villainous tales that had found their way to Sandstone.

His friends in that town, regarding this story as exactly in keeping with the character of Jim Sartine as they had known him, implicitly believed his statements, and on all occasions flatly denied the injurious reports.

The reports were not quieted; but there was not much friction between those who believed them and those who disbelieved them, and matters went on peaceably enough until the arrival of three strangers in Sandstone.

These three men were not strangers in one sense of the word, as they were well known through Texas as members of the original corps of "Rangers," and more than one person in Sandstone gladly claimed their acquaintance on the score of having served with them.

One of their acquaintances was Jim Sartine, who had been a member of that famous organization for a short time, but long enough to achieve quite a brilliant reputation.

He received them warmly, welcoming them to Sandstone, and freely introducing to his friends the three men as Sol Nettley, Joe Burgess and Jack Peole.

Under his guidance they "took in the town," made the acquaintance of the leading citizens, and were liberally entertained.

Concerning the object of their visit to Sandstone they were inclined to be reticent, allowing it to be known that they had come from Austin and were on official business, but without stating the nature of their business.

It might have been noticed, however, that they stuck more closely to Jim Sartine than to any other man of their acquaintance, and seldom lost sight of him.

On the evening of the second day after their arrival he took supper with them at the Lone Star Hotel, and after supper Joe Burgess invited him to accompany them up-stairs to their room.

"I want to show you," said Burgess, "the pair of pistols that the Gov'nor gave me for my work in ketchin' the scamp who murdered the Rawlings family on the Pecos."

Jim Sartine readily went with them to the room that was occupied by the three Rangers.

After they had entered Jack Poole loitered near the door, while Joe Burgess went to the other end of the room with Jim Sartine, and Sol Nettley took a position between his two comrades.

Burgess opened his grip sack and took out two handsome silver-mounted revolvers of the latest and best pattern, which he handed to his guest.

"There's the beauties," he said, "and I'm powerful proud o' them, not only because o' their value, but because o' the way I got them."

Sartine took the weapons and looked at them admiringly.

"They are beauties, sure enough," said he. "I would like to own a pair like them."

"Want to swap?" inquired Burgess. "Let me look at yours."

Jim Sartine was the possessor of two excellent revolvers, which he always carried on his person.

He took them off and handed them to Burgess, who stepped aside as if for the purpose of examining them.

Sartine was still looking admiringly at the brand new weapons when he was startled by the ominous click of a pistol.

Another click followed instantly, and then another.

He looked up quickly, doubtless supposing that Burgess was trying the lock of one of his weapons.

To his great surprise and consternation he found himself covered by three revolvers, one in the right hand of each of the three Rangers, cocked and leveled at him.

"What does this mean?" he sharply demanded.

"We arrest you," calmly answered Burgess. "You are our prisoner."

Instinctively Sartine raised one of the pistols he held.

"It's no use, pard," observed Burgess. "Those guns ain't loaded."

That was the case, as Sartine well knew, and he perceived that he was trapped.

He had thoughtlessly given up his weapons, and in their place he had two useless pistols.

He was fairly covered by three determined men, and was completely at their mercy.

Escape was no more to be thought of than resistance.

There was a window near him, but it was too far from the ground to be useful to him.

His only course was to accept the situation and make the best of it.

"You have got me foul," he said; "but I am ready to take my Bible oath that I don't know what you mean by it. What right have you to arrest me, and what do you arrest me for?"

"We are officers of the State of Texas," answered Burgess, "acting under the orders of Gov'nor Sheldon. We arrest you under a requisition from the Gov'nor of Arizona, signed and warranted by the Gov'nor of this State. You are accused of robbin' stages and murderin' people up in Arizona."

"There is a mistake out somehow. I was never in Arizona in my life, except to pass through."

"You've got to go there now, anyhow, and when you get there you will see what the proof is."

"This is a mean trick, Joe," protested the ex-marshall—"as mean a trick as a white man was ever guilty of. I thought you boys were my friends, and I showed you around here, and you have had the best the town could set up for you, and all you wanted was to play this sneaking game—to hang around until you got me away from my friends and in a corner, and then spring this thing on me. I would never have thought it of you."

"Couldn't help it, pard," replied Burgess. "We had to obey orders and take you the best way we could. If you are the man the requisition calls for, you are a powerful dangerous cuss, and we couldn't be too keerful. Hold out your hands."

The order was meant to be obeyed, and the prisoner held out his hands.

While Poole and Nettley still covered him with their revolvers, Burgess snapped a pair of handcuffs on Jim Sartine's wrists.

CHAPTER XXIII. A BUNGLED JOB.

As soon as the handcuffs were on, the prisoner dropped back into a chair.

His manner was cool, and he smiled sneeringly at his captors.

"You men have got the best of me now," he said; "but it won't last long."

"What's the reason it won't last long?" demanded Joe Burgess.

"Because you've got the wrong man—that's all."

"Jack, bring in those Arizona men."

Jack Poole left the room and returned immediately with Jephtha Jones and Walter Brandis.

Sartine's face lighted up with an evident look of recognition as he glanced at them; but it passed as quickly as it came.

"Is this the man?" inquired Burgess.

"That is the man," they both answered together.

"The man who was known in Arizona as Devil Dick?"

"The very man," replied Jeph Jones.

"He is the man who was guilty of the crimes charged in the requisition," remarked Brandis.

"There you are, Jim Sartine," said Burgess.

"These men know you and have come here to point you out."

"Those men are mistaken," calmly insisted the prisoner.

"Don't you know them, then?"

"I remember them both. I have met them before this, but never in Arizona. It was here that I met them, when I was Marshal of Sandstone. One of them had something to do with the railroad survey about here, and I don't know anything against him, except that he seems to be a pard of the other one, who is a tough subject. The other one I had to arrest for disorderly conduct and put him in the cooler. I suppose that's what's the matter with him now."

"Something more than that," rejoined Jeph Jones. "Have you forgotten how you killed two of Tom Throop's herders, and afterward murdered him in cold blood while his house was burning? Have you forgotten how you held up the stage at the Chiapa Pass, disguised as an Indian? I reckon you wish that you had hung me to a tree then, instead of treating me like a dog. Have you forgotten that you came with Jack Koopman's gang to wipe out the people at the Throop Ranch, and that the gang got salted? Have you forgotten that I met you in Gonzalez, disguised as a Mexican, and pulled off the big false beard you wore, and that you shot me through the head as you supposed and rode off? Have you forgotten that you and your partner set fire to another house on the Throop Ranch, and tried to burn the people in their beds? Have you forgotten that you foully murdered a poor Mexican girl before you ran away from the Territory? You know me, Mr. Dick March, quite as well as I know you."

During this crushing indictment Jim Sartine did not utter a word, but sat and stared at the speaker as if he understood nothing of what was said.

When it was ended he turned to Burgess with a smile.

"This man must be crazy," said he, "or he is playing a game that I can't begin to understand. I was never in Gonzalez, and I don't know anything about Arizona."

"There are plenty there who know you, though," sharply responded the circus man, "and all they want is to get their hands on you."

"No doubt there are some scoundrels who would be glad to get hold of me and wipe up the earth with me, as I have given that kind plenty of cause to hate me."

"There's no use in any more talk," observed the leader of the Rangers. "Jim Sartine, are you willing to go to Arizona to stand your trial, without making any fuss?"

"Oh, no. That would be too much to ask—too much like the spider and the fly. I think I understand the game. I was obliged to kill some rascally Greasers in New Mexico in the discharge of my duty, and their friends have worked this scheme to get hold of me and lynch me."

"It would puzzle the devil," observed Burgess, "to find anything like that in this requisition from Arizona."

"That's what it amounts to, though, and I don't propose to go quietly and be lynched."

"Then we will have to take you."

These proceedings, it appeared, had been provocative of thirst, as Sol Nettley remarked that it was a long time between drinks, and it was agreed that he should go down-stairs and order liquid refreshments to be brought to the room.

In the bar-room he found several of Jim Sartine's friends who were waiting for him there.

They knew that he had gone up-stairs with the Rangers, and were wondering what kept him there so long.

Naturally they expressed this wonder to Sol Nettley, and wanted to know what had become of their friend.

This inquiry, upon which he had not calculated, put the Ranger in a bad box.

As he was not a very bright man, he could not easily invent an evasive answer to suit the emergency, and his hesitation aroused the suspicions of the inquirers.

The suggestion of a friendly game of poker, or even of a talk over old times, might have satisfied them; but stolid Sol Nettley thought of nothing of the kind.

Being hard pressed for a response, he saw

no way out of the scrape, but in telling the exact truth.

Accordingly he explained the arrest under the requisition, and gave a brief summary of the charges against Jim Sartine.

His statements were received in ominous silence and with evident incredulity.

Only one remark was made by those to whom he furnished his information, and that was to the effect that if those sneaking galoots expected to take Jim Sartine out of Sandstone in any such style, they would learn their mistake before morning.

Nothing more, except a disposition on the part of the inquirers to get away, and they had all left the bar-room before Sol Nettley completed his order for refreshments.

He went up-stairs, somewhat bewildered and a little out of temper, and reported this state of facts to his chief.

Joe Burgess would doubtless have been glad to give his subordinate a severe bit of abuse for his stupidity; but under the circumstances that would only have made matters worse by exposing his plan.

His sojourn in Sandstone had informed him pretty fully of the feelings of the Sandstonians, and he could not suppose that Jim Sartine's friends would allow him to be quietly taken away, even in obedience to an order issued by the highest authority in the State.

His hope had been—and to this the previous proceedings of the Rangers had led up—that the arrest would be quietly made, and the affair would be kept from the knowledge of the Sandstonians.

When the night should have advanced sufficiently to insure a certain amount of quiet, he had expected to slip out of the hotel with his friends and his prisoner, and to get away from town before any attempt at a rescue could be made.

This plan—not thoroughly a feasible one at the best—had been spoiled by the bungling of Sol Nettley, and the leader of the Rangers was considerably annoyed.

Jim Sartine, on the other hand, was well pleased with the turn the affair had taken, and he smiled a quiet smile of malicious satisfaction.

It was certain that his friends would be speedily informed of his "fix," and it was easy for him to predict a hard time for the men who had presumed to arrest him.

In this expectation he was not to be disappointed.

The men who had gained their information from Sol Nettley had not been idle.

In an almost incredibly short time the news spread through Sandstone that Jim Sartine had been arrested on a trumped-up charge by the three Rangers who pretended to be his friends, who had been hobnobbing with him all over town, and whom he and his associates had treated in such princely style.

The arrest had been made secretly, on the sly, in a sneaking and thoroughly reprehensible manner, and was a clear case of intended abduction.

Both the friends of the prisoner and his enemies at once connected this arrest with the evil reports that had been in circulation concerning him; but widely different opinions prevailed.

His enemies naturally regarded it as a confirmation of the reports, while his friends firmly declared it to be a put-up job, as the supposed charges had been sufficiently refuted or explained by Jim Sartine.

Friends and enemies, however, were alike excited, and together they hastened to the Lone Star Hotel, which promised to become shortly the scene of stirring events.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SANDSTONE EXCITED.

JOE BURGESS and his party, together with their prisoner, were soon made aware of the excitement that pervaded the town of Sandstone; but they did not allow it to disturb their equilibrium or interfere with their enjoyment of the liquors and cigars that had been brought up to them.

Within half an hour from the return of Sol Nettley to the room, fully two-thirds of the male population of Sandstone were gathered in front of the Lone Star Hotel.

The street was blockaded, and the jam was so close, that there was no passing to or from the hotel.

It was a very noisy crowd, too; and so uproarious were its demonstrations, that its intentions were quickly made manifest.

Part of the mob demanded the instant release of Jim Sartine, while others howled for the death of the perfidious Rangers; but all swore with one accord that the officers should never leave the hotel alive with their prisoner.

The landlord was quick to take alarm.

The existence of his hotel was threatened, and it was necessary that something should be done to appease the crowd and save his premises.

He stepped out at the front door, and endeavored to speak to his enraged fellow-citizens.

At first his voice was drowned by the howls

of the mob; but after awhile he got a hearing, and begged them to tell him what they wanted.

The answers were more numerous than was consistent with a clear explanation; but their purport was unmistakable.

The mob wanted Jim Sartine. They were determined that he should not be carried away. They insisted that the officers should not be allowed to leave the hotel. They were there to protect Jim Sartine against an abduction, and they meant to do it, no matter what might stand in their way.

"Don't go too fast, my friends!" entreated the landlord. "Have a little patience, and this thing can be settled. It's got to be settled. Go as easy as you can, and don't hurt the house, while I go up-stairs and tell those Rangers that they must turn the man loose."

This was surely the easiest way to settle the difficulty, and it seemed to the terrified landlord that there was no other way to settle it.

Such a mob as that, armed and excited and determined, was abundantly able to enforce its demands, and it would be sheer folly for a few men to think of resisting it.

It would only be necessary to let the Rangers down easy by causing it to be understood that their surrender was made as a personal favor to the proprietor of the hotel, and there would be no more trouble.

But he was not yet acquainted with the men he had to deal with.

They had not come to Sandstone to be scared, and the idea of giving up their prisoner could not enter their heads.

Even stupid Sol Nettley, whose bungling had collected the mob, was ready to die right there, but never to surrender.

As they sat in the room with their prisoner, the yells of the crowd outside came to them plainly enough; but they paid no more attention to the noise than if it had been the whistling of the wind.

They were quietly conversing about matters that had nothing to do with Sandstone or the Sandstonians, and Joe Burgess was about to light a fresh cigar, when the landlord's quick step in the hall was followed by his hurried knock at the door.

"Come in," said Burgess, and he entered hastily, his pale and excited face contrasting strangely with the "quite-at-home" countenances of the others.

"Glad to see you, pard," said Joe Burgess. Sit down and make yourself at home. We are enjoying ourselves, you see. Take a drink? Have a cigar?"

"There is no time for foolishness," protested the landlord. "I have come to tell you, Mr. Burgess, that you will have to let that man go."

"Will we? Reckon not."

"You will have to. You can't help yourselves. There is the biggest crowd out in front of the hotel that you ever saw, and they say that you've got to let him go."

"You must be stretchin' it, Mr.—"

"Beers is my name."

"I've seen some tofable big crowds in my time, Mr. Beers—bigger than any that Sandstone can furnish, I'm keen to bet."

"Go and take a look at the people. Then you will be convinced."

"All right. Anything to oblige you, Mr. Beers."

Joe Burgess went to the window at the end of the hall that opened on the street, and looked down at the crowd.

It was then night, and there was no moon; but there was plenty of light in the main street of Sandstone to enable him to judge of the size of the crowd.

He was able to tell its temper, too, if that could be rightly judged by the style of the noise it made.

There are mobs and other mobs.

That is to say, some mobs are wavering and uncertain, "mere sound and fury, signifying nothing," unless a sudden move by the right sort of a leader may give them a dangerous impetus and direction.

Other mobs are more quiet and sullen, but apparently possess a settled intention and a determined purpose, and such are dangerous from the start.

It is probable that Joe Burgess was inclined to regard the Sandstone mob as one of the wavering and uncertain sort.

At all events, when he returned to the room he did not seem to have been powerfully impressed by it.

"That's a fair crowd for a small town," said he, "but not much to brag on."

"There must be two or three thousand people out there," insisted the landlord.

"Cut that down half, and you'll hit it closer."

"They mean business, too. They say that you must let that man go."

"I have my orders from the Gov'nor, Mr. Beers, and I don't take any from other folks."

"They will just turn this town up on its end if you don't give in."

"What will they do?" inquired the Ranger.

"They will burn down this hotel and ruin me."

"I reckon they can't be such fools as that. They would never gain any sort of a pint by

spillin' your property, and they would only burn up their friend with the rest of us. If they mean to make us give him up, their best chance would be to come here and take him; but they will have to settle with the State of Texas if they play that game."

"Is that your last word, Mr. Burgess?"

"The first was the last. We are here in the name of the law, acting under the orders of the Gov'nor, and it won't be safe for any man or any mob to meddle with us."

"It's all up, then!" despairingly exclaimed the landlord. "I will go down and tell them, and the circus will begin."

"Let her cirk!" was Burgess's brief rejoinder.

He and his comrades seemed to give no further thought to the matter, and there was not an immediate commencement of any sort of a hippodrome.

The landlord went down-stairs and out at the front door, where he was met by a rush of questions from the noisy mob.

"It's no use," he said, sorrowfully shaking his head. "They won't give in. They say that the law is on their side, and they mean to hold to what they've got."

This was met by howls of defiance for the law, yells of execration against the Rangers, and shouts for the immediate release of Jim Sartine.

Nothing came of this noisy demonstration, however, and none of the leaders of the mob seemed to have any practical proposition to make.

It was reserved for the landlord to make a proposition, which he did as soon as he could get a hearing.

"Suppose," he said, "that some of our best men go up there—sort of a committee, you know—and settle thngs with those Rangers, square and solid."

This was acceptable to the crowd, and there was comparative quiet while the committee was selected and prepared for action.

It was composed of a dozen of Jim Sartine's staunchest friends, all vigorous and determined men, and every one of them well armed.

A cheer greeted them as they entered the hotel and started up-stairs.

The proprietor of the Lone Star Hotel doubtless congratulated himself upon having changed the scene and style of action.

Much better for him would be a fight up-stairs if a conflict must come, than a riot that would wreck his property.

The Rangers, as they were quietly seated in their room with Walter Brandis and Jeptha Jones and their prisoner, noticed the lull in the storm outside, and commented upon it.

"The circus don't seem to be in a hurry to cirk," was Joe Burgess's brief summary of the situation.

The heavy tramp of the committee on the stairs was the first intimation they had of the intention of the crowd to "go for them."

"That means business, I reckon," said Burgess, as he rose and beckoned to his partners.

The three Rangers drew their revolvers and sallied out into the hall.

Jim Sartine chuckled with satisfaction; but his hilarity was short-lived.

Walter Brandis and Jep Jones remained with him, and the leader of the Rangers stopped at the door and spoke to them.

"Stay there, you two!" was his order. "If those folks mean fight, and if they get away with us, shoot that man where he sits. Will you do it, sure?"

"Sure!" they answered together, and their pistols clicked ominously.

The situation suddenly lost its charm for the prisoner, as it seemed certain that if his friends should overcome his captors, they would at the same time make an end of him.

By the time the three Rangers had stationed themselves outside of the door, leaving it open, the committee had reached the head of the stairs that led to that floor.

They presented a formidable appearance because of their numbers, but not more formidable than that of their three resolute antagonists.

The hall was narrow and dimly lighted with oil lamps, but the opposing parties could view each other with sufficient distinctness.

Joe Burgess stood near the door of the room, a step in advance of his two comrades, as the space was not wide enough for the three men to stand abreast and use their weapons.

There was no chance for a foe to get behind them, and the twelve men of the committee were also wedged in the narrow space, so that the conflict, if there should be one, would be most decidedly deadly.

CHAPTER XXV.

SCHEMES THAT FAILED TO WORK.

"HALT there!" was Joe Burgess's clear and sharp command, as the head of the column came within ten paces of his position.

This order was emphasized by the clicking of the locks of three revolvers, and the committee halted.

"What do you want?" demanded the Ranger. The committee put forward one of their num-

ber as a spokesman—Peter Brimmer, a banker, who was wealthy but still young and active, and who was known as one of the strongest partisans of the ex-marshal.

"We want Jim Sartine," answered Brimmer. "We understand that you have got him in there, and that you expect to take him out of the State."

"That's just the way the case stands," replied Burgess. "We have arrested him under a requisition from the Gov'nor of Arizona, signed by the Gov'nor of Texas, and our orders are to take him up to Arizona to stand his trial. I reckon you know the facts well enough, and it's no use goin' over the whole rigmarole again. If you want to see our authority, one of you can step in here and we will show it to him; but I warn the rest of you against comin' any closer."

This was not what the committee wanted.

They had no doubt of the authority of the Rangers, knowing well that they would not have made the arrest unless they had been sure of their right to do so.

What they wanted was the release of Jim Sartine, and the only question was whether it could be effected without a resort to force.

"We don't doubt that you mean well," said Brimmer; "but there has been a mistake. We know Jim Sartine well, and he is not a man who would commit any sort of a crime."

"We've got it in black and white, though, and it's sworn to, and the man is identified. He is certified to us as havin' been guilty of robbery and murder over and over again."

"We know what that means, Mr. Burgess. Jim had to kill some scoundrels up in New Mexico, and the rest of the gang had played this game to get him up there and wipe him out."

"It won't do, my friend. I have heard that before. New Mexico has nothing to do with this business, and nothin' is to be settled by talk, as I and my partners are neither judge or jury. We have our orders, and are bound to carry them out."

"You won't take Jim Sartine away from here!" roared Brimmer.

"Well, we mean to try."

"You sha'n't try, either. What you've got to do is to turn him loose and get out of town, and you've got to do it right away, too."

"Suppose we don't?"

"Then we will take him away from you, and the job will be a worse one for you. That is what we are here for."

"And we are here to keep him," retorted Burgess, "and we will make it hot for any men who would meddle with us."

"You will only throw away your lives, my friend. You know that we are able to do what we mean to do. You may get away with a few of us before we down you; but we have the whole town of Sandstone to back us."

"And we have the whole State of Texas to back us," firmly replied Joe Burgess. "If you want to buck against that game, pitch in!"

This ended the diplomatic efforts, and brought the affair to a crisis.

Peter Brimmer consulted in whispers with the other members of the committee.

Those in front, who knew that they would be exposed to almost certain death at the opening of the conflict, were not anxious to begin it; but those in the rear, who were comparatively safe and could hope to win the final honors of the battle, were eager for the onset.

The men at the rear were largely in the majority, and the will of the majority prevailed.

"Once again," said Brimmer, turning to the Rangers, "we demand the release of Jim Sartine. If you refuse to give him up, you will die where you stand, and there will be nobody to blame but yourselves."

"Just a minute," observed Joe Burgess. "I've got one more remark to make before you start in to wipe us out. There's two men in the room here, and they've got your man covered. If we three drop, their orders are to blow the top of his head off, and they'll do it, sure as death."

This announcement threw a sudden damper over the enthusiasm of the committee.

Not a man was willing to advance when it was evident that the first shot would be the death-warrant of the friend they had come to save.

If the determination of the Rangers had surprised them, their desperation astounded them.

There was silence among the men who were crowded in that narrow space, and no doubt some of them drew long breaths of relief.

"Ask him, if you don't believe me," said Burgess.

Then a shrill voice called out to the prisoner: "Jim! Jim Sartine! Is that true? Have they got you covered?"

"Yes, curse them!" was the sullen and bitter reply from the open room.

This settled the case of the committee.

Peter Brimmer did not need to consult his companions again, as it was clear enough that they could not make a move.

"You have got us foul, Mr. Burgess," said he. "We knock under and give up the scheme. But you needn't think that you are going to get off so easy. The game's not up yet. We give you fair warning that you sha'n't take Jim Sartine

out of this town, and that we will find a way to get even with you."

"We will try to do our duty—that's our only lookout," answered Burgess, as he watched the lately belligerent committee go down-stairs and out of his sight.

When the disconsolate committee reached the street they were greeted with shouts of rage and yells of derision, and the uproar began again.

The crowd vociferously wanted to know where was Jim Sartine, and why he had not been brought down to them; and the committee-men found it a very difficult matter in the uproar to explain the position of affairs so as to gain credit for their courage as well as for their discretion.

When the trouble was at last fairly understood, it was generally agreed that their retreat was a deplorable necessity, and that they might be excused for not having sacrificed the life of the prisoner, as well as their own lives.

By this time the night was well advanced, and as a matter of course, the saloons in the neighborhood of the Lone Star Hotel had been abundantly patronized.

Consequently the excitement was continually rising, and was taking on a wilder and fiercer tone, which was likely to lead to a riot of some kind, whether such a result should help the prisoner or harm him.

Though the men who were personally hostile to Jim Sartine were quite numerous in the mob, there were no collisions between them and his friends.

In one sense the honor of Sandstone was at stake, and on that point Sandstonians of all grades were united.

It was also a fact that the interests of the disorderly element lay in the direction of a riot, especially one of which they were not the promoters, as it would offer them many advantages to get the better of their private enemies and the general public.

Therefore, as if by common consent, they made no effort to hinder those who wished to accomplish unlawfully the release of Jim Sartine.

After a while the sheriff of the county appeared on the scene, information of the disturbance having been sent to him at his farm.

The city authorities were already on the spot, but were of no earthly use except to swell the numbers of the mob and add to the noise.

Some of them improved the occasion by mounting drygoods boxes and making speeches that did neither good nor harm, but were perhaps a source of pleasure to the orators.

Sheriff Beesley was a bustling, self-important personage, who was full of the belief, derived from insufficient information, that he could settle the difficulty without any trouble.

He was, by the way, a strong friend and supporter of Jim Sartine, who had saved him a good deal of trouble while officiating as marshal.

Perceiving the fiery temper of the mob, Sheriff Beesley recognized the fact that something must be done immediately, and of course he was the man to do it.

He forced his way into the hotel, and hurried up to the Rangers' room, puffing and blowing as he reached the head of the stairs.

When he came to the door of the room he found Jack Poole posted there as a sentry, but was at once admitted on announcing his name and position.

Then the whole rigmarole, as Joe Burgess styled it, had to be gone over again, with the result of satisfying the sheriff that the Rangers had been fully authorized to make the arrest.

"But you didn't need to make it in such an underhanded way," he protested.

"Yes, we did," returned Joe Burgess, "and the mob out there proves that we couldn't have done the trick in any other way."

"But the mob, as you call the citizens of Sandstone, won't let you take Jim Sartine away from here."

"We expect to do our duty—that's all."

"I am afraid, Mr. Burgess, that they will wreck this hotel or burn it down, and if a fire should once get started there ain't water enough to put it out."

"That's their lookout. If they want to destroy their own property, it's no fault of ours. All they've got to do is to let the law take its course, and the best thing you can do is to tell them so."

"Suppose you let 'em see Jim Sartine, to make 'em sure that he is alive and safe. It might kinder quiet 'em."

"I don't believe it will; but we are ready to do anythin' to keep peace in the family."

Jim Sartine was led to the open window at the end of the hall, from which he could look down on the crowd in the street.

Sheriff Beesley attempted to make a speech explanatory of this exhibition; but his voice was drowned by the yells that greeted the appearance of the prisoner.

Here was an opportunity for Jim Sartine to produce an effect, and he availed himself of it.

Raising his manacled hands, he held them out in full view of the howling mob.

This amounted to an appeal for help, and the crowd was quick to take the hint.

The yells instantly rose to a roar, and a rush was made for the door of the hotel.

"Confound it!" exclaimed the sheriff. "The scheme worked the wrong way."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SHEEP GUARDS A WOLF.

JIM SARTINE was hurried back to the Rangers' room, and Sheriff Beesley ran down-stairs, while Joe Burgess and his comrades prepared to meet the expected attack from below.

No attack was made.

The mob, lacking in definite purpose and leadership, was easily persuaded that its riotous demonstration would be likely to do the prisoner more harm than good, and again it settled back to the consumption of whisky, and the production of howls.

Three things were certain—that the Rangers could neither be persuaded nor scared into giving up their prisoner; that an attempt to rescue him violently would only result in his death, and that he could not be carried away without the consent of the people of Sandstone.

Therefore the crowd settled down to the purpose of watching the hotel and preventing the possibility of running the man off.

In the mean time the occasion was improved by the local orators, who were glad of the chance of holding forth to a good audience, and who continued to address the crowd from the improvised stands.

The addresses changed in style and tone with the temper of the crowd and the views of the speakers, who soon began to discuss political subjects and to advocate their personal claims to preferment.

This quieted the mob by drawing its attention from the main cause of the disturbance, and then the comic side of the situation began to make itself seen.

Favorable symptoms such as these induced the Rangers to hope that the difficulty might be settled so that they would be able to get safely away with their prisoner.

"If we had a man out there," said Burgess, "who could talk for our side, we might be able to make a pint."

"Suppose I go and chin them a little," suggested Jep Jones. "I ought to be able to make myself heard, as I've been a blower for a side-show in my time, and in the profession I am counted as a good cackler."

It was agreed that the circus man should proceed to "cackle;" but it was thought best that he should not go down among the mob for that purpose, as there might be a disposition to misuse him.

So he went to the window at the end of the hall, gained the attention of the crowd, and in a loud and clear voice began his task.

He made a vigorous and effective speech, so plain and forcible that he was attentively listened to, in spite of occasional hostile demonstrations by the more violent partisans of Jim Sartine.

He told of the lawless deeds of the desperado who was known in Arizona as Devil Dick, and whom he had seen there more than once.

Then he described the killing of the two sheep-herders which he had witnessed from his concealment, and told from hearsay of the subsequent murder of Tom Throop by the same man.

He went on to tell of his visit to Sandstone and his meeting with Jim Sartine, whom he had recognized at once as Devil Dick of Arizona.

Then he related the subsequent occurrence in that Territory of which he had personal knowledge, beginning with the stage-robbery in Chiapa Pass, and bringing that portion of his narrative down to the exposure and identification of the desperado at Gonzalez.

Finally he gave a vivid and thrilling account of the burning of the Throop house at night, of the pursuit of the incendiaries, and of the finding of the helpless girl whom they had murdered.

When he reached this point the crowd was as silent as a church congregation.

The speaker proceeded to utilize this period of quiet and attention by making an appeal for justice, claiming that the desperado could be easily identified at the scene of his atrocities, and that it was the duty of all good citizens to aid in sending him thither for trial.

His appeal provoked no tumult, and yet there was a sturdy provocation to his demand.

"You've got the wrong man!" shouted a loud voice from the midst of the crowd, and the cry was taken up and repeated as if it exactly expressed the opinion of the majority.

"I understand your feeling in this matter, and respect it," resumed the orator. "You have known Jim Sartine here as a faithful officer and a good man, and it is hard for you to believe that he can have been a scoundrel elsewhere. It seems impossible to you that he should have led the double life that he is charged with leading. But it is possible because it is true, and its truth can be proved to the satisfaction of any unprejudiced man."

"You've got the wrong man!" roared the crowd again.

As this was the opinion upon which Sandstone had evidently settled, it was useless to make any further attempts to controvert it just then, and the Rangers could only wait, hoping for a favorable change.

The mob waited, too, set in its purpose to prevent the removal of Jim Sartine; but the excitement gradually wore off, and it became a good-natured mob, inclined to be peaceable unless provoked.

Walter Brandis thought that he then saw a good chance to give effect to an idea that had entered his head.

As he was well acquainted in Sandstone, he proposed to go out and feel the pulse of the people, and particularly to enter into communication with the faction that was opposed to the ex-marshall, in the hope of inducing them to combine to assist the Rangers in the discharge of their duty.

There was no objection to this on the part of his comrades, as he proposed to take his own risks, and he declared that there could be no danger in the attempt, as he was not generally known to be connected with the "abduction" of Jim Sartine.

He easily passed out at a side door of the hotel, as the exit of one person was not considered by the mob a matter of any consequence.

He pushed his way through the throngs to Sam Sholes's saloon, as that was supposed to be the head-quarters of the element in opposition to Jim Sartine.

It was also to be presumed that the proprietor of the "Onward," as Marshal of Sandstone, would be willing to aid the State officers in the execution of their lawful orders, and Walter Brandis naturally counted upon getting help from that quarter.

In this hope he was disappointed, the fact being that Sam Sholes found himself in such a delicate position that he was not disposed to make a move in any direction.

He received the young engineer rather coldly, and as soon as the subject was broached, took him into a corner and requested him to speak quietly.

"As a friend o' yours, Brandis," said he, "and as a man who wants to see you keep out o' trouble, I'll tell you jest how I'm fixed, though it seems to me that you ought to see it without bein' told."

"Bein' an officer of the law, I suppose it's n'y duty to enforce the law and stand up to the other officers; but you know that this is a State matter, and I hain't got nothin' to do with anythin' outside o' local matters."

"That's a pint that you ought to ketch onto."

"Another pint is that Jim Sartine's friends claim that I was elected marshal by the roughs and the rustlers, and I can't deny that I had that sort o' help."

"So, you see, if I should turn in and help to run Jim off, they'd say 'twas the roughs who were turnin' ag'inst him, and then there'd be a row, and I should hurt you fellers more'n I'd help you."

"To give it to you straight, I and my crowd are willin' enough that Sandstone should git rid of Jim Sartine, and we believe that the Rangers have law and justice to back 'em; but we've got to play our keards keerfully."

"Whichever way this game works, Jim Sartine will be run out o' Sandstone, and I guess I know how the cat'll jump. So it ain't none o' my mix, and all I've got to do is to sit back and pass. How does that strike you, pard?"

"It strikes me that you have no notion of doing your duty and enforcing the law," indignantly answered Walter. "It strikes me that you are playing a small and cowardly game. It strikes me that the people here have chosen a sheep to guard a gang of wolves."

Sam Sholes's red face grew redder; but he kept his temper admirably.

"That's rayther rough," said he; "but I've been a friend o' yours, Walter Brandis, sence you struck this town, and I'm willin' to take it off o' you, bein's you're excited about this business. Hello! what does that mean?"

A throng of men came rushing in at the open door of the saloon, and their cries as they entered were full of menace to the young engineer.

"That's one of them!"

"That's one of the sneaks who want to run off Jim Sartine."

"Go fur him, boys. If they don't turn Jim loose we'll string this 'un up."

They evidently meant what they said, and were fully prepared to carry out their declared purpose or something more.

Brandis backed up against the wall, but perceived that his chance of defending himself was very slight.

As the mob made a rush for him, Sam Sholes interposed his burly form between them and his friend.

"None o' that!" he shouted. "This man is a friend of mine, and if you want to down him you'll first have to get me down."

"Get away from there, Sam Sholes!" ordered the ringleader. "That chap is one of the gang who come here to run off Jim Sartine, and we mean to settle with him."

"Settle with me, then. I know Walter Brandis, and some of you know him. He is

here on a fair and honest errand, and he sha'n't be hurt in my house as long as he behaves himself."

"You had better get away from him," insisted the leader of the mob. "Everybody knows that you are no friend of Jim Sartine's, and if you meddle with this you may get yourself into trouble."

"I ain't his enemy, no matter what everybody knows. I won't put a straw in his way, nor lift a finger to hurt him. But this young man is all right. Even if you should hang him, that wouldn't help Sartine a mite."

"We mean to try the scheme, anyhow, and you will have a chance to see how it works."

"Hold on!" shouted the marshal. "You had better not try to buck ag'inst the law and me, too. Walter Brandis came over to see me in a friendly way, and as a friend I'm goin' to take him back to the hotel. Any man who interferes with us will be apt to git hurt. Take my arm, Walter."

The men blocked up the door, barring the egress of Sam Sholes and his friend.

"Clear the way!" ordered the marshal, "or you will have a fight on your hands. You know that I've only got to give a yell here, to start such a row as 'll tear Sandstone to giblets."

The mob did know it, and they knew that a row of that nature would be sure to do Jim Sartine more harm than good.

So, after a whispered consultation among themselves, they abandoned the effort and cleared the way.

Sam Sholes took his friend around to the hotel, and left him in safety at the side entrance from which he had emerged.

"I reckon it's a good thing for you, my boy," said he, "that I was sheep enough to guard one wolf. Now, if you will take a sheep's advice, you will stay right here in the hotel until this trouble kinder quiets down. I've a notion that it's goin' to be settled in some way afore mornin'."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TIME OF TRUCE.

WALTER BRANDIS felt rather sheepish, himself, after the man he accused of being a sheep had saved him from serious trouble, and was glad to get back to the Rangers and Jephtha Jones, whom he made acquainted with the ignominious failure of his attempt at negotiation.

"Well, there's no harm done," observed Burgess, "and you've brought back a little something in the way of news."

"Nothing of any use," replied Walter.

"I don't know about that. Sam Sholes told you that he thought the trouble would be settled in some way before morning, and I reckon he knew what he was talking about. All we've got to do is to be patient and stand pat and wait for the draw. We've got the best end of the game so far."

The prediction of the marshal was verified, and it was Sheriff Beesley who brought it to pass and effected the settlement.

At least, he rejoiced in the belief that it was he who concocted and carried out the scheme, though the truth was that it was suggested and mainly operated by shrewd Sam Sholes.

Beesley came up to the Rangers' room and asked them, in his fussy, important way, if they would respect a writ of *habeas corpus* for the production of their prisoner the next day.

"Of course we would," answered Joe Burgess. "Anything that's law will find us ready to obey it and live up to it as well as we can."

"I haven't got the writ yet," continued the sheriff, "but will attend to that part of the business the first thing in the morning. My notion is that I had better go down and tell the people that the writ is out and served, and get them to let you take your prisoner to the jail and keep him there until the judge is ready to hear the case."

"That will suit us well enough, Mr. Sheriff. The judge will find out that our papers are all right and that the man is identified, and then he can't help giving them back to us."

Sheriff Beesley performed his part of the contract with vigor and dispatch, and without many more airs than the occasion required.

The way had been cleared and smoothed for him by Sam Sholes, and all he had to do was to walk in it.

He stretched his conscience sufficiently to assure the people that the writ of *habeas corpus* had been secured and served, and that the Rangers had promised to obey it.

There was no danger, therefore, that any attempt would be made to run off Jim Sartine, who would be taken to the jail and guarded by the Rangers, who would in their turn be guarded by the sheriff and his deputies.

The only thing necessary was to gain the consent of the people to the transfer of Jim Sartine from the hotel to the jail, and that question the sheriff would proceed to put to a vote.

It was carried by a roaring majority which proved that Sam Sholes had not been idle in his task of influencing public sentiment.

The sheriff hastened up-stairs to inform the Rangers of this satisfactory result, and the landlord of the Lone Star Hotel, who was overjoyed at an arrangement that would remove the scene

of the disturbance from his house, hastened to make ready a hack which he used for the conveyance of passengers between the hotel and the railroad depot.

The Rangers entered the hack with their prisoner and Sheriff Beesley, and two of the latter's deputies got on top with the driver.

Thus the opposing parties were equalized in that outfit, and Jim Sartine's friends were satisfied that he was safe.

Yet they were determined not to lose sight of him, and the crowd accompanied the hack and watched it closely until its living contents were deposited inside of the jail.

Though the temporary settlement of the affair gave them a chance to go home and sleep, they were in no hurry to avail themselves of it, but adopted a new method of procedure.

A strong detachment remained to watch the jail building until morning, and the rest of the mob gradually straggled off and disappeared, so that Sandstone became comparatively quiet and peaceable.

In the morning the town was reasonably quiet, having settled down to the conviction that a moderate amount of watchfulness would prevent Jim Sartine from being run off; but the crowd about the jail became nearly as big as it had been during the night, and a new complication was introduced into the affair.

This was explained by the consequential sheriff, acting as spokesman for the citizens of Sandstone, to the Rangers, who had remained in the jail with their prisoner.

"You fellers will want your breakfast," observed this eminent diplomatist, "and so will Jim Sartine. Of course you can't get anything fit to eat in this shanty; but there's a decent restaurant a little way from here."

"Then we will have our meals sent in from there," remarked Joe Burgess.

"What's the use? It would be just as handy and a heap nicer to go there and get them."

"That wouldn't suit the business we are in just now."

"Reckon it would. Don't see why it should interfere with anythin'. This is a sort of a truce, you see, and you know how that used to work in war times. The fact is, my friend, that the citizens of Sandstone insist upon Jim Sartine bein' allowed to go to the restaurant and take his meals until his case is settled. If you won't give in on such a small pint as that, they may get their backs up and raise another row."

"That don't scare us," rejoined Burgess.

"We don't want any row, and I believe, for one, that the easiest way is always the best; but it looks to me as if this is some sort of a scheme to get our man out of our hands."

"You strike it wrong, Mr. Burgess. The Sandstone folks don't mean that. I'd be willin' to swear it on a stack o' Bibles. They won't meddle with him nor with you. All they want is to have a chance for a good look at him, and to be sure that he is safe. They will see to it, and so will I, that he comes back here with you, just as he went."

"All right, Mr. Sheriff, if you say so. We want to go as far as our duty will let us in accommodating Mr. Sartine and the people of Sandstone, and we will rely upon your word that we and our prisoner are not to be meddled with."

This was Sheriff Beesley's second triumph, and he plumed himself upon it considerably when he went out and informed the crowd of his success.

Jim Sartine was taken to breakfast at the restaurant.

The handcuffs were removed from his wrists for the purpose; but the three Rangers were his body-guard, with their hands on their deadly revolvers.

As for the citizens of Sandstone, they kept the promise which Sheriff Beesley had made for them, and refrained from interfering with the prisoner and his guard.

If there were turbulent spirits among them—and there were surely some who were inclined to be turbulent—their obstreperousness was repressed by the others, and they were compelled to be quiet and orderly.

The crowd escorted Jim Sartine from the jail to the restaurant, and pressed about him and kept close to him, but made no demonstrations outside of expressions of sympathy and friendship, and promises to see him safely out of his scrape.

For his part, he plainly showed that he was pleased with the degree of freedom that he had secured, and with the sympathetic professions of his many friends.

His eyes were so bright, and he carried himself with such an air as he answered the greetings of the throng, that it must have occurred to his captors that he would be a hard subject to handle if he should be free and armed.

At the restaurant there was no sign of a disturbance, nor was there any excitement except such as was friendly and good-humored.

A portion of the crowd pressed their way in, greatly to the annoyance of the proprietor of the establishment, and stood about the party of four, interposing occasional remarks, while the rest waited outside; but there was no sign of any attempt at a rescue.

After breakfast Jim Sartine was accompanied back by the crowd that had escorted him thither, and was again safely lodged in the jail with his captors and the sheriff's deputies.

At dinner-time Sheriff Beesley suggested a repetition of the previous performance, and the Rangers, having succeeded so well with the breakfast attempt, were by no means averse to trying it again.

So Jim Sartine was started out from the jail again, escorted by the Rangers and the sheriff's deputies and the crowd, and again the party seated themselves in the restaurant and ordered dinner.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GREAT PISTOL ACT.

JEPHTHA JONES and Walter Brandis remained at the hotel when the Rangers took their prisoner to the jail; but they did not stay there long.

Landlord Beers, though he did not openly object to their presence, gave them to understand that he considered them partly responsible for the disturbance that had threatened to wreck his house, and that he still regarded them as an element of discord.

The hint was sufficient for the two friends, and they sallied out when the crowd had left the vicinity of the hotel.

They sauntered about, endeavoring to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible, but soon discovered that there was no occasion for keeping in the background, as the citizens of Sandstone were not disposed to molest them.

The crowd, in fact, was a friendly and good-natured one, and the temporary settlement that had been made appeared to be agreeable to everybody.

It might have been a good thing for Brandis and his friend to do some talking for their side of the case, and to show up Jim Sartine in his true light; but they thought it best not to make any efforts that would be calculated to stir up animosity, and therefore held their peace.

In the morning, when the crowd began to gather more thickly about the jail, they circulated among the citizens pretty freely, and were soon made aware of the intention of taking Jim Sartine to a restaurant for his meals.

They saw that intention carried into effect, and were both of the opinion that it was not a good plan, though it worked very well as far as the breakfast was concerned, and the prisoner was safely returned to the jail without any rescue or disturbance.

Jephtha Jones would have gone to the Rangers and urged them to run no more risks in that way; but his friend persuaded him not to do so.

They knew their business, Walter said, or believed that they did, and might be offended if advice should be thrust upon them.

Besides, the arrangement was satisfactory to the citizens of Sandstone, who seemed to be disposed to carry out their part of the agreement in good faith, and there could be no doubt that the crowd was orderly and good-natured.

Yes, the crowd was good-natured enough; but two friends had cause to suspect that the sweet temper of the Sandstonians arose from a feeling of security in regard to the position of their friend, rather than from a simple desire for peace.

Comments upon the prisoner and his captors were freer than they had been, and the two men who were known to have come with the Rangers for the purpose of identifying him were no longer regarded with hostility, but were favored with friendly and even jocular remarks.

"You have made a mistake," said one; "but it will soon be straightened up."

"We don't worry about Jim Sartine," said another. "He will be all right after a while."

From such statements as these the Arizona men were led to conclude that the judge who issued the alleged writ of *habeas corpus* had been "fixed," or that some other arrangement having the look of legality had been made for securing the freedom of the prisoner.

As a matter of fact, however, no such writ had been issued or even applied for.

It was a fiction of Sheriff Beesley's which was generally accepted as a truth and had thus far served its purpose very well.

Not until dinner time did Jephtha Jones and Walter Brandis get a suspicion of the real intention of Jim Sartine's friends.

He was taken to that meal as he had been taken to his breakfast, guarded by the Rangers and escorted by a peaceable crowd of citizens.

The two men from Arizona mingled with the throng for a while, listening to the comments that were made upon the performance and the situation and demeanor of the prisoner.

Supposing that there was nothing more in the matter that deserved their attention, they started to get their own dinner, intending to take some needed rest when they had satisfied their hunger.

Their information came from a man who was a bitter enemy of Jim Sartine's, and who was not altogether satisfied with the way things were going on just then.

Hardly had they got out of the way of the crowd when this person stopped them and gave them some startling news.

"Is Jim Sartino eatin' in thar yet?" he inquired.

"I suppose so," answered Brandis.

"That's a mean game they're playin'."

"What game?"

"I reckon you wouldn't ha' got hold of it. His friends have hung a couple of six-shooters under the table he was to eat at, and when he gets ready he'll pull 'em out an' skip. Thar's a boss ready for him."

"Are you sure of that?" demanded Jep Jones.

"Sure as I stand here."

Both the young men were struck at once by the possibility of the successful operation of such a scheme.

The suggestion that was made to them accounted easily for the good temper of the Sandstonians and their confidence in the ability of their friend to get out of the scrape.

Their resolution was instantly taken.

"Thank you, my friend," said the circus man.

"We will go and break up that game."

"Unless it is too late," suggested Brandis.

"We will try, anyhow."

They hurried back, made their way through the crowd as rapidly as they could without drawing particular attention to themselves, and pushed into the restaurant.

Jeptha Jones glanced quickly about as they went, and did not fail to notice a saddled horse standing near the door of the establishment.

The restaurant was crowded, but by interested spectators rather than by customers, although most of the tables were occupied.

Of course the waiters experienced no little difficulty in getting about and attending to their duties, and it was hard work for the two men from Arizona to push their way through the mass; but they succeeded in coming within sight of the table at which Jim Sartine was seated.

They were just in time, indeed, to witness an extraordinary scene.

They were not in time to make available the information which they had received on the street.

Just then the meal was over, and nothing remained but to finish the drinks that were standing on the table before the Rangers and their prisoners.

Jim Sartine, who seemed to be in remarkably good spirits at the moment, emptied his glass quickly, pouring the contents down his throat at a gulp.

As he did so he dropped his napkin on the floor, and bent down to pick it up.

For the space of a few seconds he was partly hid from his captors.

When he rose there was a startling change in his attitude and demeanor.

He did not rise to his seat on the chair, but jumped at once to his feet, tall, erect and threatening, with a cocked revolver in each hand.

"Clear the way!" he shouted, in clarion tones that rung through the crowded room.

"Clear the way! I'm off!"

And he was off.

It was wonderful with what celerity a clear path was opened for him, all the way to the door, through that throng of people.

It was wonderful, too, how quickly it closed behind him as soon as he had passed.

If the Sandstonians there present had been trained and drilled for the purpose, the maneuver could not have been more perfectly executed.

The three Rangers were so startled and amazed by his sudden appearance in his new role, that they were "struck all of a heap," as the saying is, and several precious seconds were lost.

When they had risen to their feet and drawn their weapons, they found an almost impenetrable mass of Jim Sartine's friends between them and their late prisoner, who had then nearly reached the door.

Though the crowd had opened so quickly and easily to allow him to escape, there was no passage through it for his foes.

There was no attempt at violence, no resistance to the officers of the law, no threatening, not even any pushing—only a peaceable and good-humored crowd, to which the only objection was that it was in the way.

It was terribly in the way—so much so that the discomfited Rangers found themselves quite helpless.

Their shouts and orders were unavailing, and they could not use their pistols for fear of injuring some innocent person.

Jep Jones and Walter Brandis had come upon the scene just as the prisoner was performing his great revolver act, and that was the first and almost the last that they saw of him there.

When the path was opened for him, they were unceremoniously thrust aside and hustled out of the way, as if it was generally known that they were his foes and must be kept at a distance.

They shouted and called on him to halt; but that only made their position more evident, and caused them to be hustled in friendly fashion a little further away.

It was as impossible for them to fire upon him as it was for the Rangers to make the attempt.

Indeed, if they had been able to do so, and

had happened to hit him, they would have discovered the real temper of the crowd very suddenly, as they would have been torn to pieces on the spot.

Jim Sartine, in his swift passage through the throng, caught a glimpse of the face of Jeptha Jones, and darted at him such a look of hatred and promised vengeance as made the circus man change color.

He might have executed his vengeance then and there; but he was as little able to use a weapon as his foes were, and he had no time to spare.

He swiftly ran out of the restaurant to the street, jumped on the horse that was awaiting him there, and rode away at a pace that soon carried him out of town.

Heretofore there had been no noise to speak of—no cheering—no boisterous encouragement of the escaping prisoner—no excitement to indicate the deep interest felt by the crowd in the performance.

No sooner was he mounted, however, than a deafening chorus of yells burst forth from the assemblage, and it seemed as if the entire population of Sandstone had turned out to view the exit of Jim Sartine.

The unanimity of the crowd in everything that could be done to aid his escape was wonderful, if not admirable.

As soon as he was known to be safe, the throng in the restaurant quickly and quietly dispersed, leaving the Rangers and their friends free to act.

It was then too late for them to do anything.

Jim Sartine was already out of sight when they reached the street, and they were forced to content themselves with grumbling and expressing their disapprobation of the entire proceeding.

The crowd, being then in the best possible humor, took their complaints and accusations in good part, and plied them with pleasant banter about the loss of their prisoner.

"That was the meanest kind of a game that you fellers played on us," observed Burgess.

"It was a smart game that Jim Sartine played," answered one of the friends of the ex-marshall. "Who could have thought that he was going to cut such a caper as that? We were all so surprised that we were struck of a heap and didn't know what to do."

"Except to give him a good chance to slide out," suggested Burgess.

"He scared us, you see. But perhaps it is best for all concerned that he is off and away, as that was the easiest style of settling the trouble. The worst of it is that he stole the fastest horse in these parts, and you couldn't get hold of anything that would begin to catch up with him. That is what makes us sorry."

Joe Burgess did not care to reply to this sort of talk, and went with his friends to the hotel, where no objection was made to them then.

"What are you going to do about it now?" inquired Jeptha Jones.

"Nothing," answered the Ranger. "If you men should hunt him and find him, you can call on us to go and take him; but I don't believe that you will find him in Texas."

"Very well. For my part, I am going back to Arizona."

"Do you suppose he will strike that country again?" asked Brandis.

"He might. Like as not. I'm going there, anyhow."

"We will go together, then."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A PICNIC SPOILED.

SOBRA was a typical New Mexican town, or village, or hamlet, or whatever it deserved to be called.

That is to say, it was typical of the old style, being a small and ugly collection of adobe houses which might as well be called mud hovels.

The inhabitants were mostly Mexicans and Mestizoes, given to *chile Colorado*, *tortillas*, *cigarritos*, *aguardiente*, laziness, dirt and fleas, to say nothing of still more objectionable "small deer" that infested the households.

The fact that they lived could only be explained by the supposition that little was required to keep them alive, and their visible wealth was so small as to be nearly invisible.

Yet in this miserable, shabby, poverty-stricken settlement of Greasers, Devil Dick's Arizona partner, the fastidious and dandified Ben Hillman, had been sojourning for several days.

It was not of his own inclination that he remained there, as may well be supposed, but because it was no easy matter to get away, and because he could not settle on any other place of refuge at the time.

Ben Hillman had been rapidly descending in the social scale since he parted with Devil Dick.

From the place of which he had spoken as his expected haven until the storm blew over he had been speedily driven forth, and in his wanderings thereafter he had gone from bad to worse, until he was forced to "bring up" at Sobra.

He wore the same stylish garments which he had sported in Arizona; but there was only a

ragged and dirty remembrance of their former style about them.

In fact, he had become a dilapidated and disreputable specimen of a tramp, such as could have found favor nowhere except among the Greasers of Sobra.

Even they had proved to be too much for him.

He had "tackled" them at various games, but mainly at their favorite monte, and had got the worst of it right along.

Such wits as they possessed had been exercised in that direction, and much poverty had made them sharp.

They were on their own dunghill, too—literally as well as figuratively—and had their peculiar ways of helping each other, into which the stranger could not hope to be initiated.

Instead of gathering in their small coins, according to his expectations, he was compelled to witness their appropriation of his store.

His horse and rifle and revolver—the most valuable goods of a man in his position, and the last to be parted with—had gradually passed into the possession of the Greasers, and he was left with nothing but his tattered garments.

Instead of accumulating a sufficiency to give him a start in a better locality, he had lost the little he owned, and was unable to get anywhere.

In this emergency there was but one scheme to which he could have recourse.

He must steal away from Sobra, and must steal something to carry him away.

There were but few horses in the hamlet, and that which had belonged to him was the most available for his purposes.

He resolved to steal it, and took advantage of the last hours of a dark night to effect his object.

The theft was successfully executed, and he had the horse saddled and bridled, ready for mounting, when he was struck by the absolute necessity of having a weapon.

Accordingly he left the horse hitched, and went back to steal his rifle.

The Mexicans, however, were more wide-awake than he had supposed them to be.

They had "dropped on" his theft of the horse, and when he came back with the rifle they waited for him and nabbed him.

After that there was only the question of a few preliminaries between him and his fate.

Though the people of Sobra were Greasers of the greasiest kind, they were sufficiently civilized to know that the proper punishment of a horse-thief is death, and all Texas could not have given them any points in that business.

For economic considerations, also, the best thing for them to do with Ben Hillman was to hang him.

He had got rid of all his possessions, and had become a nuisance to even such a community as that.

If he remained among them they would be obliged to support him.

He could not get away except by robbery, and he had shown them that he was willing to rob them.

The theft of the horse and the attempted theft of the rifle furnished a fine excuse for getting rid of him in an easy and effective manner.

It was only necessary that the proceedings should be conducted decently and in order.

The Greasers of Sobra were well enough acquainted with the simple methods of lynch-law courts, some of them having doubtless officiated in such tribunals as the accused or suspected parties.

In the early morning, as the sun was rising over the hills that shut in the valley, they organized their court and began business with a free consumption of *aguardiente* and *cigarritas*, quite in the style of more enlightened citizens of the Great Republic.

Nothing could be plainer than the proof of the crime, and the conviction and sentence of the criminal followed as a matter of course.

It was decided that he should be hung from the limb of a convenient tree, and that the horse which he had stolen would be the immediate instrument of his execution.

The occasion was turned into a picnic by the people of Sobra, the women and children coming forth from their hovels to witness the hanging, baking *tortillas* in the open air, and doing their best to give an air of festivity to the event.

It was anything but a picnic to Ben Hillman.

He had been so miserable of late days that he had not cared what might become of him, and death had seemed preferable to such a miserable existence as he was likely to lead; but to be strung up by a pack of ignorant and filthy Greasers was too shameful and wretched a death for a man of his antecedents and former pretensions and ambitions.

He did not condescend to beg for his life, but viewed the proceedings with a disgust which he was unable to conceal.

The women, partly out of compassion, and partly for the sake of prolonging the picnic, brought him a breakfast of *tortillas* which he was allowed to eat.

He was also given, in response to his entreaties,

a small measure of *aguardiente*, although the Mexicans grumbled at this, as they could not see the propriety of throwing away liquor on a man who would not live long enough to enjoy the sensation of a "drunk."

Then his arms were tied behind his back, and he was mounted on his horse, which was led to the proper place.

The fatal noose was placed around his neck, and a Mexican climbed up into the tree to make the other end of the rope fast to the limb.

Before the rope had been drawn tight a horseman came riding at a gallop among the scattered hovels of Sobra.

He had nearly reached the group about the tree before his approach was discovered, and his sudden appearance caused a temporary suspension of operations.

All turned to look at him, and perceived that he was a tall and stalwart man, mounted on a magnificent horse.

Ben Hillman, whose face was uncovered, saw the stranger, and his heart beat high with a new hope as he recognized his Arizona partner, Devil Dick.

Before they could recover from their surprise, the horseman had dashed into the midst of the throng, scattering men and women and children, and at a word his panting steed halted at the side of the horse on which the condemned man was mounted.

A sharp knife glittered in his right hand, and the rope was cut.

With another quick stroke the cord that tied Ben Hillman's hands was severed.

Up went the knife to Devil Dick's mouth, where he held it between his teeth, while with two revolvers he began firing right and left, scattering the Mexicans in all directions.

Ben Hillman, as soon as he realized that he was free from rope and cord, snatched his bridle-rein from the trembling hand of the man who was holding it, and added to the confusion the prancing of his horse.

"Git!" ordered Devil Dick, and the two partners went off at a gallop.

The Mexicans, recovering from their surprise and fright, fired a few ineffective shots at the fugitives; but they were quickly out of range, and the picnic was at an end.

When they were fairly out of sight of Sobra and quite beyond the reach of pursuit by the Mexicans, the partners moderated their pace and permitted themselves to talk.

"That was a close call, Dick," said the younger man—"the closest I ever had."

"Should say it was close. Those dirty Greasers had you foul and no mistake. How did you get into such a scrape?"

Ben Hillman's explanation required a recital of his wanderings and misfortunes since he had separated from his partner, and he gave it pretty fully.

"You are in hard luck," observed Dick March, "and you were within a hair's breadth of being put out of luck forever when I caught sight of you."

"I had given up, Dick, and was as good as a dead man when I saw you; but then I was sure that my time hadn't come. Did you know me when you sighted me?"

"Yes—I knew you by your clothes."

"By these wretched rags?"

"Just that. They are rags, as you say; but I caught on to the cut right away, and then I went for you like a shot."

"You couldn't have turned up at a better time. But how did you happen to be there, old man? Where have you been, and what have you been doing?"

Devil Dick related his adventures, which corresponded so exactly with the recent career of Jim Sartine in Sandstone, that if the most prejudiced Sandstonian had heard the tale he must have been convinced that the two men were identical.

"It is plain to be seen, Ben," he said in conclusion, "that you are not to be trusted to run alone. You can't get along without somebody to look after you."

"You have been in hard luck, yourself," observed the other.

"Yes, but through no fault of my own, and I came out of the scrape with a whole skin, a fine horse, two good guns, and a fair supply of money. At the first safe town we come to we will rig you out in some new toggery and get some guns and ammunition. Then we will go up to our old stamping-ground and see if we can't strike a streak of luck."

"Do you think it will be safe to swing out in Arizona again?" inquired Hillman.

"Safe? What's safe got to do with us? As safe as any place. Where else would we go? Texas won't suit me for a while."

"It is too darned hot for me."

"The only other chance would be to light out for the far north, and that is too much of a trip. We will have to work the Arizona mine."

"Arizona it is, then. We know where we are when we get there."

CHAPTER XXX.

BEN HILLMAN'S PLUCK.

JEPHTHA JONES and Walter Brandis, having reached Tucson on their way to Gonzalez, took

the stage there to be carried on to their destination.

Both were eager to get back to the Throop Ranch, to learn how their friends had fared during their absence, and to relate their interesting adventures in Texas.

Jep also desired to look after his circus property, and Walter was naturally anxious to return to Etta Throop.

As it happened they were the only passengers in the stage at the start, and the driver was a man with whom Jep Jones was not acquainted; but they did not feel a bit lonesome, as they were sufficient company for themselves, and it was likely that other travelers would be picked up on the road.

At the third stopping-place, just as night was coming on, four men got into the stage.

Nothing of the kind was expected there, as the stopping-place was only a station of one house, and the two friends were somewhat surprised at this accession to the party.

They were yet more surprised when they noticed the new passengers more closely.

The four men were apparently acting in concert, and one of them was the leader.

This fact was made evident when the supposed leader, perceiving that there were already two passengers inside, directed one of his party to get up with the driver, and his order was instantly obeyed.

With the other two he entered the stage and took a seat.

He was roughly dressed, was armed with a rifle and a revolver, as were also his companions, and wore a big felt hat slouched down over his face.

When the stage had started he took off his hat, and the two passengers from Tucson recognized him at once as Lieutenant Cripps of the Gonzalez cavalry post.

The recognition was mutual, and the meeting was a joyful one.

"I know you both as soon as I saw you," said the cavalryman, "though I wasn't anxious to make the fact known at the station. It was because I found you here that I put one of my men outside."

"I don't understand this," remarked Brandis. "What are you doing here and in that rig? It looks as if you are on business."

"I am. The fact is that I am crazy to catch that infernal scoundrel, Devil Dick."

"Devil Dick!" exclaimed the two friends, together.

"That same inveterate old enemy."

"Has he got back here already?" demanded the circus man.

"Indeed he has, and he is as large as life and more vicious than ever. You went to Texas to hunt him, but I suppose you failed to find him."

"We found him easy enough, but lost him just as easy. I reckoned that he would make his way back to this region, but had not expected him to turn up so soon."

The circus man proceeded to relate the adventures of himself and his friend in Sandstone, giving the full particulars of the capture and escape of Jim Sartine.

Lieutenant Cripps was deeply interested in the recital and somewhat puzzled by it.

"This is simply wonderful," said he, "that a man who is known here as a desperado of the worst kind should have got up a reputation in a Texas town, as a first-class square and law-abiding man. He must have played it mighty fine on the Sandstone people and have held himself in with a tight rein. I don't doubt, though, that your Jim Sartine is Devil Dick. If he hadn't been sure that his crimes could be proven on him he would have stayed to face the music. How long since you lost sight of him?"

"He has had plenty of time to get back here," answered Brandis, "as we loitered in Texas, where we both had business matters to look after, and it is likely that he struck a bee-line for his old haunts."

"He struck quick and hard. He has already held up this stage twice, and the second time he killed the driver, Sam Jones."

"Poor Sam! The scoundrel had a grudge against him, I suppose," suggested the circus man.

"It is likely that he had. As the Gonzalez folks were slow about taking the matter up, and as I was crazy for the scalp of Devil Dick, I decided upon taking a few of my men and setting a trap for the desperado."

"Did you suppose you would be strong enough? The men on the outside have an advantage. How much of a gang has Devil Dick got?"

"He has only one partner. Two men have done the work so far. I thought that four of us ought to be enough. Now there are six, and if that's not a plenty we ought to go under."

Walter Brandis, who had been aching to ask after their friends in the Gonzalez valley, broke in and put that interesting question to the cavalryman.

"They are all right," answered Cripps. "The young man has nearly recovered his strength and nothing has happened to annoy them."

"His sister is well, I hope," suggested Walter.

"She was quite well when I last saw her. I have been out there but once since you left, re-

membering our little agreement. If I had not met you on your return, I would have gone to advise them to come to Gonzalez until Devil Dick could be got out of the way. But I hope there will be no need of that now, especially as we may happen to strike him to-night."

Walter was glad to hear the reference to that "little agreement," and there was nothing to interfere with the amicable understanding between the cavalryman and his friends.

Cripps explained his plan to the others, as far as he had a plan, and they gladly put themselves under his orders for the expedition.

At the entrance to Chiapa Pass, which was justly regarded as the most dangerous spot on the route, Lieut. Cripps directed the man who was on the seat with the driver to come inside.

Then all examined their weapons carefully, and the stage went on into the pass at its usual rate of speed.

The night was cloudy and dark, especially inside of the pass, yet not so dark but that objects at a little distance might be readily perceived.

In the course of time the disguised soldiers nodded, and Walter Brandis and his friend, who were tired by travel, fell fast asleep.

It was just at the head of the pass and near the end of the night when the sleepy ones were suddenly roused by a sharp hail and the sudden stoppage of the vehicle.

Instantly they were wide awake and attentive to the orders of the cavalymen, which were given briefly and clearly.

Half of the party got out as quickly and quietly as possible on the side of the pass which was supposed to be opposite to that from which the hail came, and the rest made ready for a spring on the other side.

This movement was not secret enough to escape the attention of the would-be robbers, who at once perceived that they had struck a trap, and ran for their horses, which were at the distance of a few rods from the stage.

The men who had emerged opened fire, the others hastened to jump out, and all joined in pursuit of the fugitives.

It could easily be perceived that one of them was a tall and stalwart man, and those of the party who had seen Devil Dick had no doubt that he was then before them, though they had not been able to catch a glimpse of his face.

The other was a smaller and slighter man, and he ran with a limp, betokening a lameness that was destined to bring him to grief.

Devil Dick, who was in advance, had reached and mounted his horse, when his companion fell.

Before he could rise the pursuers were nearly on him, and he was abundantly covered by rifles and revolvers.

His partner looked back for him, saw his predicament, and hesitated as if with the thought of going to his assistance.

The glance showed him the uselessness of such an effort, and the shots of his pursuers admonished him that he must consider his own safety.

It was a wonder that he had not already been hit; but Devil Dick seemed to be bullet proof, as some of his foes had already had occasion to believe.

In spite of the shots that were sent after him he galloped away unhurt, and was soon out of sight.

His partner, who was of course Ben Hillman, was left an easy prey to the pursuers.

He had been suffering with a sprained ankle at the time of the attempted stage robbery, and in his fall the injured limb had got another twist, so that it was impossible for him to run any further.

So he sat on the ground where he had fallen, and waited for the speedy and terrible punishment that was frequently the fate of criminals of his class who were caught in the act.

His captors, however, had other views, wishing to make the prisoner serve a purpose that was more important to them.

After a brief consultation with his two friends Lieut. Cripps proceeded to interrogate him.

"Who is your partner?" he demanded. "Who is the man who got away?"

"Just a friend of mine," carelessly answered the prisoner.

"Was it Devil Dick?"

"What would you give to know?"

"You had better take hold of this thing a little more seriously," said the cavalryman. "We have caught you in the act here, and have a right to string you up to the nearest tree. If you will tell us who that man is, and show us where we can find him, we will give you your life. If you refuse, we will hang you without any more bother."

"Go on with the hanging," stolidly replied the prisoner.

"We don't care about the man's name," continued Cripps. "We know as well as you do that he is Devil Dick, and he is the man we want. Put us on his trail, and show us where we can find him, and we promise you that you shall go free."

"You may think you know what you please," answered Hillman. "Whoever the man is, he saved my life a bit ago, and I don't mean to go back on him. I would no more think of doing the least thing to help you get him foul,

than I would think of trying to fly over the hills here."

"String him up!" commanded Cripps.

A rope was procured, in one end of which a noose was knotted, and the other end was passed over a limb of a neighboring tree.

The prisoner's arms were bound behind his back, the noose was put around his neck, and he was given another chance to comply with the requirements of his captors.

"Go on with the hanging," was his answer, as he closed his lips tightly.

It was Ben Hillman's second experience of the kind within a short time, and on this occasion there was surely no chance of succor or escape; but he did not flinch.

"Run him up!" ordered the officer, and the three soldiers obeyed the order promptly and implicitly.

The rope stretched, and the helpless prisoner rose gradually from the ground, strangling as he ascended.

His legs, which had not been tied, involuntarily squirmed and struggled, and his breast heaved convulsively.

His limbs were becoming limp, and his head was beginning to hang over, when the cavalryman made a sign, and the three soldiers let him down at once.

The ordeal had nearly, if not quite, proved too much for him, and he fell on the ground, an unconscious heap.

The noose was loosened and removed from his neck, and water from a canteen was freely dashed in his face, the operation being aided by a little whisky from a flask.

Gradually he came back to life; but it was a painful recovery, accompanied by convulsive gasps and shudderings that were terrible to behold.

When he had revived sufficiently to be able to sit up and stare about, Lieut. Cripps tried him again.

"You know how it is now," said the officer. "Are you willing to tell us where Devil Dick is to be found, or do you want to go up again?"

"Finish the job," feebly gasped the victim. "He saved my life, and I don't want to keep it at the expense of his."

"The choice is between life and death. Do you choose death?"

"Yes, rather than go back on my friend."

The heroic obstinacy of Devil Dick's partner brought Cripps and his friends to a stand-still in their proceedings.

They consulted quietly together, while the half-hanged man dropped over on the ground.

"We can't hang a man like that," said the officer, at last. "There must be some good where there is so much grit. Put him on the stage, boys, and we will take him on to Gonzalez."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A STRANGER IN GONZALEZ.

BEN HILLMAN was safely taken to Gonzalez—the more safely as he was then not in a condition to make any trouble—and was placed in the jail there.

Walter Brandis and Jephtha Jones hurried away to their friends at the ranch in the Gonzalez valley, and Lieut. Cripps was left to receive the honors due him for the capture of Devil Dick's partner.

For this he was given proper credit and many thanks by the less enterprising people of Gonzalez, though they would have been better pleased if he had got the greater criminal.

It was admitted that he and his party would have been justified in hanging Ben Hillman when he was caught red-handed in the act of attempted stage-robbery; but, as they had not immediately executed justice upon him, and had brought him within reach of the law, the law must take its course.

There was undoubtedly sufficient justification for a legal hanging in the murder of Sam Jones the stage-driver, and the prisoner would be convicted and hung.

He must be kept in jail to await his trial, and in the mean time perhaps he might weaken, and give information that would lead to the capture of his still guiltier accomplice.

So Charley Cripps got that business off his hands, and returned to his military duties.

Two days after Ben Hillman had been consigned to the jail, a stranger arrived in Gonzalez.

Of course there was nothing unusual in this, as strangers arrived frequently; but this particular stranger soon became an object of interest in the little town.

He came by stage, and registered at the shanty which was known as the Gonzalez House, as Samuel Prosser.

Samuel Prosser was a tall and stout man; but his fatness, if it could be so called, had the singularity of being confined to a protuberance of the front part of his person, which gave him quite a portly appearance.

He had long, grizzled hair, and a heavy grizzled beard, with no mustache, and on his right cheek, under the eye, was a purplish patch such as is commonly styled a birthmark.

This gentleman, who was well-dressed, and with manners to match, announced himself as a capitalist from New Orleans, who had come to the Territory for the purpose of investing in lands or mining property, or both.

As a wealthy speculator he was naturally considered a bonanza by the Gonzalez people, who sought his society and made much of him.

He appeared to be well supplied with money, and was liberal in his ways, though he was not allowed to spend much by the owners of mining and other lands, who insisted upon feasting and treating the man to whom they hoped to dispose of a portion of their unproductive property.

He talked with them freely, spoke largely of his wealth, examined tract after tract, bargained and chaffered, and made such a good impression that he might have had deeds to a pretty large segment of the Gonzalez district without paying a dollar, if he had been so inclined.

Not at all fastidious in his amusements was Samuel Prosser, and by no means averse to a little poker.

Indeed, he was always ready for a friendly game with men who had money, and in the course of these transactions he absorbed a larger amount of the spare cash of Gonzalez than the people generally were aware of.

It was an admitted fact that the stranger was a master of that speculative game.

Consequently he was considered a smart man, and respected as such.

Among other matters of interest to the town, he was made acquainted with the doings of Devil Dick and the recent capture of that desperado's partner.

He wanted a description of Ben Hillman, and when it was given him, he said that he thought he recognized a man who had robbed him in the eastern part of the Territory.

He proposed to go to the jail and see if he could identify the man, and was taken thither by some of his friends.

At the jail Samuel Prosser failed to identify the prisoner, but he made quite a stay there, questioning him freely and inspecting his quarters closely.

Before he left he gave Ben Hillman some money.

"I felt a bit sorry for the poor devil," he explained to his friends. "He don't happen to be the man I was looking for, and I ought to pay him something for the way I worried him."

The stranger was informed that Ben Hillman continued obstinate and obdurate, refusing to furnish any clue that could lead to the capture of Devil Dick, although he might make terms for himself with the authorities for so doing.

"There must be good stuff in him," observed Samuel Prosser. "I am not sorry that I gave him a little change."

This was regarded by the Gonzalez people as a liberal act on the part of the stranger.

Lieutenant Cripps in the mean time, was occupied with the affairs of his post and some other matters.

Although a good soldier, and strictly attentive to his military duties, he was not perfect.

He was passionately fond of a game of cards at which the stakes were not allowed to run too high, and occasionally sought amusement of this description in Gonzalez.

Two nights after Samuel Prosser's visit to the jail the cavalryman was in town, deeply engaged in his favorite game.

On this occasion he was so intensely interested that it was not until two o'clock in the morning that he quit the game and started to return to his post.

The night was about as dark as a night could be, and he was afoot; but it was not far to his destination, and he knew the way so well that he believed he could have walked it blindfold.

He was obliged to pass the jail on his route, and he was surprised at seeing two horses standing in a little patch of timber just before he reached that building.

This was an unusual, if not an unaccountable circumstance, which naturally led him to think of Ben Hillman in the jail, and of Devil Dick somewhere outside.

He turned his steps toward the building to see if, by possibility, any harm was being worked there.

The Gonzalez jail was a small, square structure, the lower portion of which was stoutly built of heavy logs and covered with similar logs for the safe-keeping of prisoners.

Above this was a framed story, in which the jailer lived with an occasional assistant, and this was reached by a light staircase running up the outer side of the log portion.

Quite a primitive affair was the jail, but considered sufficiently strong and safe for all practical purposes.

As the cavalryman came near the building and got a view of the side opposite to the staircase, he perceived that there was plenty of cause for his suspicions.

A man was there, stooping down over an opening that had been made in the wall by cutting out a piece of one of the large logs.

Charley Cripps approached him cautiously, as swiftly and silently as possible, and discovered to his great surprise that the more than suspicious character was Samuel Prosser, the wealthy

speculator, whose acquaintance he had recently made in Gonzalez.

There was no mistaking Mr. Prosser's style of dress, his long hair and his protuberance.

Cripps also perceived that a hole had been cut in the inner planking, and that a man was crawling out of the hole.

This man must be Ben Hillman, as he was known to be the only prisoner then in the jail.

Evidently it was a case of rescue, in which Samuel Prosser was the outside agent; and the cavalryman proposed to stop it at all hazards.

He rushed forward and seized Prosser by the coat collar, at the same time emitting a yell that could not fail to be heard by the jailer above.

The cavalryman counted on his strength as sufficient to overcome the old man and the lame prisoner, but he was sadly mistaken.

Samuel Prosser had given the Gonzalez people to understand that he was afflicted with rheumatism, and he always carried a heavy cane, with which he supported his somewhat unsteady steps.

That stick was in his hand as he rose quickly when a grasp was laid upon him; but there was no sign of rheumatism or any other ailment in his sturdy and rapid action.

He tore himself loose from the grasp with a force that left a shred of his coat in the hand of his assailant.

Then he raised the heavy stick, taking a step backward for room to use it, and dealt the cavalryman a fearful blow on his head.

Charley Cripps fell like a log.

Without paying any further attention to his fallen adversary, Samuel Prosser helped Ben Hillman to emerge from the hole, and the two ran to the little patch of timber, neither showing the slightest symptom of lameness.

The jailer had been aroused by the shout of the cavalryman, and came hurrying down from his habitation.

When he reached the scene, so quick had been the work of the prisoner and his friend, the rapid galloping of their horses was the only indication he had of what had happened.

Looking about, he saw the hole in the wall, and Lieut. Cripps lying near it.

He raised the unconscious man, and endeavored to revive him; but there was no sign of life to reward his pains.

Leaving him there, and making sure that his prisoner had escaped, the jailer hastened to Gonzalez to give the alarm and fetch a physician.

As it was useless at that hour to attempt a pursuit of the fugitives, a number of curious and excited citizens accompanied him to the jail with the physician.

Lieut. Cripps was found to be alive, and was taken to the town and cared for; but it was several hours before he was sufficiently recovered to give anything like an intelligible account of his adventure.

His statements concerning Samuel Prosser amazed and confounded the Gonzalez people who had banked so heavily on that speculative gentleman.

It was impossible that he should be the man who had assisted Ben Hillman to escape.

He was too old, too portly, too rheumatic for such work, and a man of his wealth and character could not be in any way connected with any criminals.

Lieut. Cripps had been so badly stunned by the blow on his head, that his mind was affected, and his statements need not be seriously considered.

Nevertheless, search was made for Mr. Samuel Prosser, and he was not found within the limits of Gonzalez.

His room at the hotel was entered, and the contents of his capacious gripsack were found to be stones and paper.

"Your capitalist from New Orleans," said Lieut. Cripps, "was nobody but Devil Dick."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A VILLAINOUS PLOT.

WHEN Ben Hillman and his rescuer had got well away from Gonzalez, they rode on calmly and at a moderate pace, as if they had no fear of being followed.

"This is the second time you have saved my life, Dick," said the late prisoner, "and I can't tell you how thankful I am."

"You don't need to tell me anything about it, my boy," replied the other. "You fully deserved all I have done for you."

"Deserved it?"

"Indeed you did. When I knew that you had refused to go back on me to save your life, though they strung you up to make you give me away, I said that you were the man for me, and I swore that I would get you out of their clutches if it should prove to be the last act of my life."

"How did you know that, Dick?"

"I was there, my boy."

"There? Where?"

"When I rode away, after they had gobbled you at Chiapa Pass, I didn't go far, scarcely out of sight. I jumped off and hitched my horse, and sneaked back to where you were."

"You did?"

"Of course I did. Do you suppose I was going to run off and leave a partner in distress as long as there was any chance to help him? That is not the style of yours truly, Devil Dick. It was easy enough to do, as it was night yet, and the brush was thick at the foot of the hill there. I sneaked back under the brush, and hid where I could see and hear everything that went on. If they had strung you up a foot further, or had shown that they meant to kill you, I believe I would have opened fire from where I lay, and I shouldn't wonder if I could have cleaned out the gang."

"You are as good as gold!" exclaimed Hillman.

"You were the good one then, it seemed to me. When you stuck it out so bravely, and were as true as steel to your friend, he would be a poor sort of a scalawag if he couldn't be true to you. It wasn't worth while to fight them after they had decided not to hang you, and they would have been likely to blow the top of your head off as soon as I pitched in. So I did the best I could, and lost no time in rigging myself up and coming to Gonzalez to look after you."

"You must have played your cards very well there?"

"The rig was the thing, Ben. I got the hair from a show chap in Sandstone, who taught me to make up. I was afraid that somebody might catch on and expose me, as had happened in Gonzalez once before."

"Why, Dick, I would never have known you when you came to the jail, if you hadn't told me who you were."

"There was only one cuss to be afraid of—that sharp-eyed circus man who seems to be on my track or in my way wherever I go. But he was away, luckily, and if I don't put him out of the way forever, I'm mistaken in myself. Well, Ben, it has been a fine spree for me, and I have made a good pile above expenses, too. I only wish I could let those Gonzalez galoots know that the man they have been making much of and losing their money to is their old enemy, Devil Dick."

"Don't you suppose that the man who came upon you at the jail knew it?"

"No. He was fooled as badly as any of the rest of them. I hope I laid him out for good. If I hadn't been in such a hurry just then, I would have made a sure thing of it."

About the middle of the afternoon the two partners reached Jack Koopman's Ranch, where they acted and were received as if they were quite at home.

One of the men took care of their horses, informing them that "the old man" was out on the range, but would return shortly.

In the mean time they were told to call for what they wanted, and they freely did so.

A good dinner was brought to them, and when the master of the ranch came in he found them enjoying his liquors and cigars.

This was not at all unpleasant to him, however, as he appeared to be overjoyed at finding them there.

"Help yourselves, boys!" was his hospitable greeting. "Make yourselves at home. I am as glad to see you as if I had struck an unbranded lot of cattle."

"For my part," observed Ben Hillman, "I am more than glad to get here."

"I can believe that. So Dick got you out of hock. Bully for Dick! He's a whole team with a bulldog under the wagon. Give me a pull at the whisky, Dick, and tell me all about it."

"You must wait a bit, old man," replied Devil Dick. "I want to get rid of this confounded toggery that makes me feel like a fool, and I don't know what you have done with my duds."

"I'll get them."

As speedily as possible the desperado shuffled out of the Samuel Prosser garments, removing a large amount of "stuffing" that had caused him to bulge so visibly in front, and attired himself in his own apparel, which made him look and feel vastly better.

He picked up the coat that he had worn at Gonzalez, and handed it to the ranchman.

"Here's your coat, gov'nor," said he; "but I'm sorry to say that there's a bit of the lapel gone. I suppose the cuss who tried to nab me at the jail must have torn it off."

"That's bad—my best coat, too."

"I am well able to pay for it. I struck those Gonzalez galoots at poker, and you may bet that I just settled them."

"I don't want any pay, Dick. To see you two back here, safe and sound, is worth a pile of coats. Sit right down, and tell me how the scheme worked."

Devil Dick told with full particulars the story of his adventures at Gonzalez and the rescue of Ben Hillman.

The recital caused a large consumption of liquors and cigars, and it appeared to please Jack Koopman vastly.

"That was grand!" he exclaimed. "Dick March, you are a wonder. You can just beat the created universe at working such schemes as that, and I wish I owned you. I don't care a straw about the coat, and anything in reason about this place that you two want you are

welcome to. What do you expect to go at next?"

The cattle baron's extreme friendliness was strongly suggestive of a desire to ask some favors in return; but Devil Dick did not seem to think of that, and perhaps was quite willing to return favor for favor.

"We mean to keep on at the business we have begun," said he. "It's not played out yet by a large majority, and I mean to show those Gonzalez galoots that they will have to be wider awake to get ahead of Dick March. But there are some cusses about here that I want to get even with as I go along—two men in particular, who are rising up in my path wherever I go and whatever I do."

"Two cusses who are connected with that measly sheep ranch down in the valley?" inquired Koopman.

"That's the sort—the circus man and his partner, and most especially the circus man. I thought I had blown the top of his head off when he showed me up at Gonzalez; but he is as hard to kill as a cat. Those two followed me down to Texas, and got out the writ for me there, that drove me out of Sandstone just when I was about to drop into a good thing. When the accident occurred that landed poor Ben in jail, they were on hand, and they helped to spring the trap, if they didn't set it."

"They are stopping at the sheep ranch, now," suggested Koopman.

"I know it, and I mean to work some scheme to get hold of them and settle all scores with them right soon."

"In doing that, Dick, you would be likely to worry the whole set at the sheep ranch."

"I am willing enough to worry them. How do you feel toward those sneaks now, old man?"

"The same as ever, only more so. I hate them, Dick, worse than pison, and would do a good thing by anybody who would rid the valley of them."

"Then your scheme will work in with mine nicely. I can settle my accounts and clean out that ranch at the same time. We have had bad luck there twice; but the third time is the charm. The thing is as good as done, old man. With your help I can do a good turn for both of us."

"But I can't help you, Dick. I mustn't show up in the business any more. I've got a position to hold, you know, and if I should pitch in there again it might be dangerous for me. No, I can't take a hand."

"You don't need to take a hand. You won't have to show up in the business or be known in it. All you will have to do will be to let me have a few of your men when I call for them. You can spare them, and they will be glad of a little excitement."

This was true enough, as it was known that Jack Koopman recruited his cowboys from the toughest characters to be found in that region, and that they were always ready for violent and lawless deeds.

Like some of the guerrillas during the civil war, it was hard to tell whether they were farmers or fighters, as they passed very easily from one condition to the other.

"That's all right," said Koopman. "No doubt the boys will be willing to help you for the fun of the thing, and I will see that they don't lose any money by it. But I would like to know what you think of doing. Two schemes have been tried, and they failed to work. You don't want to make any more noise about it than you can help, too."

"I intend to work on the quiet," answered the desperado. "We will try a bit of strategy that will fetch them, I think. At this time of the year they corral their sheep at night. With a little help I will run off the sheep, and they will naturally hunt them up. That will lead them into the hills, where we will lay for them and give them such a dose of lead pills as will cure them of hunting Devil Dick. What do you think of that scheme, old man?"

"It ought to work. There is a girl at that ranch, too. How about her?"

"I will see that her case is attended to. That is one of the points I mean to make."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ONE END OF THE PLOT.

THE two returned travelers from Sandstone were of course gladly welcomed at the Throop Ranch in the Gonzalez valley.

Chinquapin was overjoyed at meeting Jephtha Jones, and Etta Throop did not disguise her pleasure at seeing Walter Brandis, and George Throop was more than glad to shake hands with both of them.

That young gentleman had got well of his wound.

He had not yet fully recovered his strength; but he was able to get about as well as anybody, and considered himself as sound as ever.

With the aid of Chinquapin and one hired herder, he attended to all the business of the ranch, and had already made various improvements about the premises.

The story of the travelers was listened to with the deepest interest by those they had left be-

hind, who were sorry to learn of the escape of Jim Sartine at Sandstone, after his arrest had been secured.

Their displeasure was largely increased when they were informed that he had returned to Arizona and had resumed the business of stage-robbing at the old stand.

All those at the ranch felt that the fact was fraught with danger for them, as the returned desperado was not likely to forget his grudges.

The position of affairs was hardly bettered by the imprisonment of Ben Hillman, as nobody supposed that it would lead to the capture of his partner.

Hardly had the travelers settled down when they got the news of Ben Hillman's escape from the Gonzalez jail, with the declaration of Lieutenant Cripps that the escape had been engineered by Devil Dick.

There could be no doubt of this, as the cavalryman, who fortunately possessed a tough skull, rode out to the ranch to give them the particulars of that occurrence, and to assure them positively that the man who passed as Samuel Prosser could have been no other than Devil Dick.

This state of things caused an earnest and serious discussion among those interested; but it was agreed that nothing was required except caution and watchfulness.

There were surely enough men at the ranch to meet any ordinary attack if they should not scatter, and it was believed that the alliance of Devil Dick and Jack Koopman had been effectually broken.

But the danger came in a way that was entirely unexpected and calculated to throw the settlers off their guard.

Lieut. Cripps returned to his post, having stray Indians to look up the next day, and the people at the ranch slept the sleep of the just, quite unaware of any lurking peril.

Early in the morning there was an alarm.

George Throop's herder, who slept in the sheds with the circus men, came to the house and aroused the inmates to report that the corral had been opened, and that the sheep had been turned loose or driven away.

It was easy enough to do this quietly, and nothing was known of the performance until the herder's discovery in the morning.

The men hastened out to the corral, and the growing light speedily showed them that an enemy had been at work, as fresh tracks of horses and men were plainly visible about the corral.

"Some of Jack Koopman's sneak thieves have been about here," said Jephtha Jones, "and they have done this to worry us. It is likely that they have driven the sheep away a little distance, and have then scattered them and left them."

This was the most probable supposition, and the circus man's opinion was concurred in by the others.

There was but one thing to do then, and that was to go after the sheep and bring them back.

As it was quite possible that they might encounter the sneaking foes who had raided the corral, it was thought best to go in force and well armed.

Accordingly all the men about the place mounted, some of Jephtha Jones's hands taking circus horses, and set out on the trail of the lost sheep.

It was an easy trail to follow, so broad and plain that it required no skill or pains to keep it, and all the ranchmen had to do was to ride right ahead as rapidly as they cared to.

At this rate they might expect to overtake the marauders or their prey before long, as the sheep were slow travelers at their best.

It was evident, however, that several men were driving the whole herd, as the tracks of their horses were visible enough.

Though the pursuers clearly outnumbered the raiders, it was more than possible that some sort of a fight might be expected if one party should overtake the other.

For this the ranchmen were prepared, or believed that they were.

The trail led across a broad plain and into the hills beyond it, entering at a gap that could be plainly seen before it was reached.

"Their game is to drive the sheep across the range and keep them there," said Jephtha Jones. "We will have to hurry up if we are going to catch them."

All spurred their horses into the gap; but the shock of a terrible surprise awaited them there.

As they rode up the slope they were greeted by the sudden flashes and reports of several rifles.

The effect of this unexpected fire was fearfully disastrous.

One of the circus man's hands was shot dead, and another was badly hurt.

Walter Brandis fell to the ground, the blood streaming from a serious wound in his side.

The rest of the party had as much as they could do to disentangle themselves from their slain or wounded horses.

"Down on the ground and fight for your lives!" shouted Jephtha Jones, and the order was promptly obeyed by all who were able to obey it.

Without any directions they knew what they

ought to do, and hastened to take the only chance for their lives that was left them.

They sunk down behind the bodies of two horses and such other cover as they could find, and prepared to open fire upon the villains who had led them into the trap.

The difficulty was that their adversaries were unseen and they could only fire at spots on each side of the pass from which the deadly volley had been delivered.

For awhile there was no response to this random firing, and they began to believe that the marauders had decamped.

In this they were greatly mistaken, as the few men who drove off the sheep had been joined at the pass by others who were awaiting them there, and the combined force had no reason to fear the ranchmen.

They were, in fact, merely waiting to "get a good ready on," in order to exterminate the hated "squatters."

Silently and stealthily they had moved back to secure their horses, which had been left further up the pass.

Then they mounted, and came down in a body to charge their foes and make an end of them.

Jeptha Jones, who was lying behind a dead horse with Chinquapin, perceived their advance, and knew that it meant extermination.

He was more than sure of this when he saw at the head of the gang the tall and dark man, mounted on a heavy black horse, whom he knew so well as Devil Dick and Jim Sartine.

"Lie low, my boy," he whispered to Chinquapin, "and don't stir until they fire. Then pour it into that scoundrel who murdered your sister. Let us kill him, and I will be ready to die."

Yes, they were going to fire.

They halted an instant at the mouth of the pass, raised their rifles, and delivered a well-directed volley at the crouching ranchmen.

Bullets plumped into the carcass behind which Jep Jones and his companion lay, and whistled over their heads; but they were not hurt, and were too busy just then to notice whether any of their friends had been hit.

As the mounted men came on, Jep fired with a careful aim at the tall man on the dark horse; but there was nothing to show for the effect of the shot.

Chinquapin's rifle cracked, and Devil Dick's left arm dropped; but he grabbed the bridle-rein with his right, and came on, looking darker than ever.

The circus man well knew that the advance meant death to him, as the desperado headed directly for his position, and he determined to sell his life as dearly as he could.

Providence intervened in behalf of himself and his friends, and the signal of the intervention was a bugle note.

It was evidently a cavalry bugle that was blown, and Jep Jones had never heard sweeter music from a high-priced soloist or a full band.

The scene changed suddenly as a squad of cavalrymen came galloping over the foot of the hills, headed by Lieut. Cripps.

This settled the question for Devil Dick and his cowboy allies.

They were outnumbered then, and it was no part of their scheme, in any event, to come in collision with the United States.

Consequently they turned quickly, and made good time as they got back into the pass.

Lieut. Cripps rode up to his friends, and a few words from Jep Jones put him in possession of the main facts of the dastardly outrage.

He at once sent off a portion of his men, guided by Chinquapin, to pursue the marauders and bring back the sheep.

George Throop, as soon as he was free to move from his shelter, had hastened to the assistance of Walter Brandis, and the circus man also lost no time in reaching his friend.

The young engineer was badly wounded, and had lost so much blood that he was speechless when they got to him.

Lieut. Cripps, who justly considered himself no slouch of a surgeon, stopped the further flow of blood, and did for the wounded man all that could be done then and there.

He rendered a similar service to one of the circus hands who was less severely wounded.

The other who had been hit was past all help, having fallen dead from his horse when the bullet struck him.

It appeared that the shots fired by the marauders on emerging from the pass had done no damage; but the answering fire had not been without its effect.

One of Devil Dick's cowboy followers had been shot dead when they began their charge, and George Throop was sure that he had fired the shot that knocked him over.

When the loose horses were secured it was found that there were enough for the returning party, and the body of the slain circus hand was placed upon one of them.

A litter of poles and blankets was prepared for Walter Brandis while his friends awaited the return of the men who had been sent in search of the sheep.

They had not to wait very long.

The lost herd were found huddled together in a hollow up in the hills, and the men who found

them had been instructed not to pursue the raiders beyond the point of that discovery.

The sheep were driven forward, and the sad and disconsolate party set out to return to the ranch in the Gonzalez valley with one dead man and one who was severely wounded.

As their progress was necessarily slow, it was evident that they would not reach the ranch until an hour or so after night had set in.

Jeptha Jones, fearing that Etta Throop would be worried by their long absence, and wishing to break to her the news of the disastrous issue of the expedition, rode on in advance of the party with one of his men.

When he arrived at the ranch a terrible surprise awaited him, the full nature and extent of which came to him gradually.

Etta Throop was not there to meet him.

She was not to be found in the house, and was not visible anywhere, and there was not the slightest sign or trace of her.

After looking everywhere carefully, to make sure that he had not missed her, and that she had not left a message or any sign to indicate the cause of her absence, his suspicion concerning her disappearance became a most mournful certainty.

He mounted his horse, and sadly turned back to meet his slow moving friends.

He had left them to be the bearer of bad news; but he had yet worse news to break to them.

The plot of Devil Dick and his allies, as it then appeared to the circus man, had two ends.

One end was doubtless the destruction of himself and his comrades.

The other end—but he could not bear to think of what that might have been.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE OTHER END.

It must be confessed that George Throop and his companions acted hastily, if not recklessly, in going in pursuit of the raiders who had driven off the sheep, and leaving his sister alone at the ranch.

Yet they were quite excusable under the circumstances, and she did not complain, but, on the contrary, urged them to go.

The people of the ranch had not been subjected to the least annoyance since the burning of the house, and it was to be supposed that their enemies, if they still had enemies, were all concerned in the raid which her friends had gone to furnish.

Besides, she had in the house a rifle and revolver which she was both able and willing to use.

In short, she considered herself able to take care of herself, and had no fear of being molested.

So she locked the doors and went about her usual avocations, with nothing on her mind but the hope that her friends would have good luck and none of them would get hurt.

They had been gone nearly an hour when an alarm came, or what at first struck her as an alarm.

It was, however, only a friendly hail, in a cheery and pleasant voice, which even a very timid person could not have construed as anything alarming.

She was cautious enough to cast a glance out of the window before responding, and what she saw there would have been sufficient to dissipate her fears if she had any.

In front of the house was a man who had halted there, but had not yet dismounted from his horse.

He was a young man of good appearance, who surely could not be suspected of being a rough, or even a cowboy, or dangerous character of any kind, as he was neatly dressed, with some pretensions to style, and had the look of a stranger from "the States."

The belief that was suggested by his general "set up" was strengthened by the fact that he did not carry a rifle as was the custom of those who were better acquainted with that region.

"Hello!" he hailed again in his cheery and pleasant tones, and just then Ella Throop, pleased with her reconnaissance, opened the door.

"Beg pardon, miss," said the stranger: "but in Tennessee we always holler when we come to a strange place, to let the folks know we're about, and to get them to keep the dogs off of us."

"Are you from Tennessee?" inquired the young lady, immediately interested by this statement.

"Yes'm, and I'm looking for an old friend of mine named George Throop. I was told that he lived somewhere about here."

"This is George Throop's house," said Etta.

"Glad to hear that. Wonder, now, if you're his sister."

"Yes, I am his sister."

"I've heard of you often enough, but never saw you up in Tennessee. Reckon you've heard George speak of me often. I am Jack Hanson, and we were great chums when we were classmates at the institute."

"I don't remember the name," answered Etta! "but I am very glad to see one of my brother's friends."

As she stood in the doorway she was considering the propriety of inviting the young man to alight and come in, and her hesitation must have seemed to him rather inhospitable.

"I suppose George is not at home," he suggested.

"I am sorry to say that he is not, Mr. Hanson. He went away with the rest about an hour ago to hunt some sheep that had been turned loose or driven away. I suppose you could overtake him if you are in a hurry to see him, as the trail of the sheep must be a plain one."

"Well, I hardly think it would do to try that, as I would be sure to get lost in this country. I am pretty well tired out, and so is my horse, as I lost my way several times as I came out here from Gonzalez. I am sorry that he is not about, as this was the only chance I had to get a sight of him."

The hint was a plain one, and Etta Throop was ashamed of herself for her lack of hospitality.

The stranger was from Tennessee, was a friend of her brother's, and was a young man of respectable appearance and manners.

Why should she not invite him in? There could be no danger in that.

"Won't you 'light down and rest awhile, Mr. Hanson?" she asked a little timidly. "Perhaps George may come home soon."

It did not occur to her that the young man, who was entirely unacquainted with the country, must have left Gonzalez in the night, to get to the ranch at that hour in the morning.

He accepted the invitation with alacrity, slid off his horse, hitched him, and came forward smiling.

It was not an illustration of the Spider and the Fly, but a revised version of the fate of Little Red Ridinghood and the Wolf.

The stranger, who was no other than Devil Dick's partner, Ben Hillman, was well aware of the fact that all the men were away, as he had watched the house from a concealed position until the time came for him to play his part in the plot.

If Little Red Ridinghood had known that fact, she would have shut her door and aimed her rifle at the Wolf; but unfortunately she could not even suspect it.

She invited the young man in, gave him a seat, and set before him the liquid refreshments that were usually considered the first part of hospitality in that region.

"We had an early breakfast, Mr. Hanson," said she; "but I can soon make you a cup of coffee if you will have it."

"No, thank you, Miss Throop I am not hungry. The fact is, I've had my breakfast."

"Had your breakfast? Why, when did you leave Gonzalez?"

"Quite a while ago. Yesterday afternoon. Got lost, you see, and had a bed and a breakfast at a ranch down the valley."

And yet he had said that he and his horse were so tired.

Etta Throop remembered that remark, and she cast a suspicious glance at the nice young man.

She also moved toward the corner of the room in which her rifle stood, as she felt safer over there.

Ben Hillman was quick to recognize the fact that his explanation was not entirely satisfactory, but was not disposed to make matters worse by trying to amend it.

"If you will excuse me a moment, Miss Throop," he said, "I will step out and give my horse a chance to feed."

The young lady made no objection, but was glad to see him leave the house. She was almost tempted, indeed, to close and lock the door behind him.

He did not go at once to his horse, but stopped just outside the door, looking northward as if something interesting had caught his eyes.

"Here's somebody coming, Miss Throop!" he exclaimed. "Can it be your brother George? It looks like him."

Etta was overjoyed by this announcement.

Nothing could please her better just then than the arrival of her brother, and the stranger was looking in the direction from which George might come, and there could be no reason why he should seek to deceive her on that point.

Her hope ran away with her reason, and she hurried outside.

She looked in the direction in which he seemed to be looking, and it was the direction that had been taken by her brother and his friends.

"Where is he?" she inquired. "I see nobody."

"Can't you see him?" he demanded. "Just at the foot of the hills yonder. Don't you see a man riding this way?"

"I see nothing of the kind," she answered as a sudden suspicion seized her.

Something more than a suspicion seized her at the same time.

Ben Hillman, who was standing behind her and pointing northward as he spoke, grabbed

her by the arms, and in a twinkling tied them behind her back with a handkerchief.

She screamed and protested in vain as he pushed her to where his horse was standing, held her as he mounted, lifted her when he had mounted, and rode away toward the other side of the valley.

The poor girl was so frightened and agitated by this rough treatment that for a while she was unable to speak.

When she gained control of her nerves and her voice she perceived that it was useless to struggle or cry out.

She only knew that she was being helplessly borne away from her home, and that she was in the power of a villain whose intentions must be of the very worst.

"What do you mean?" she at last ventured to demand. "Who are you, and where are you taking me to?"

"All in good time, my lady," he replied. "There is no hurry for you to know that. Don't fret any more than you can help. It won't do you a bit of good."

"This is a cruel and cowardly plot," she protested.

"Well, you may be right about that; but we have to do cruel and cowardly things sometimes to get what we want in the world. You are in for it, though, and you may as well take it easy."

She was silent after that, devoting her thoughts to an effort to understand her position and to consider all possible and impossible means of escape.

It was not until they had crossed the valley and were approaching the hills on the other side that he gave his explanation of the abduction, and then she could not complain that it failed to be clear and sufficient.

"You may as well understand this thing," he said. "I don't have to tell you; but I am a plain and straightforward cuss, and we will get along better, I reckon, if you know just what this little game means. You asked me who I was. My name is Ben Hillman, and I am the partner of Dick March, who is known here as Devil Dick. I am the man who got out of the Gonzalez jail a while ago, and I reckon you have heard of me."

She had heard of him, and this information did not reassure her a bit.

"You said it was a cruel and cowardly plot," continued her captor, "and it does seem to be something in that line. The fact is that your friends have been persecuting Dick March. They have given him a hard time, and have tried to get his neck stretched. Me, too, for that matter. So he determined to get even with them, or a little more so. The plot, as you call it, has two ends. Devil Dick and his paras have pulled your friends off after a lot of sheep, and will be likely to worry them some before they get through with them. That left you alone at the ranch, and gave me a chance to work the other end of the racket. Well, I worked it to suit myself, and here you are, and now you know where you stand."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CAPTOR CAPTURED.

ETTA THROOP listened to the desperado's explanation with no visible sign of emotion, though she was still greatly troubled and agitated.

A certainty of the worst kind is preferable to suspense, and from his declarations she was at least able to decide, as he said, where she stood, or was seated at that moment.

But there must be something beyond her present position, and she was anxious to know more.

She was then quite cool and composed, and made her inquiry pleasantly and almost carelessly.

"And here I am," she said; "but what is to come? Where are you taking me to, and what do you expect to do with me?"

"Up into the hills," answered Hillman. "My partner will meet me there when he has attended to his part of the contract, and I am taking you to him. You needn't worry about that, as you can't help yourself."

It was possible that she might help herself if she could get her hands loose, as she had a revolver of which her captor knew nothing; but it was impossible to use it.

She saw that she had a part to play, and it was a difficult and dangerous part; but she did not shrink from it on that account.

It was the only scheme she could think of that offered her a chance of escape, and any chance must be seized with a death grip.

Her brother and friends would never had supposed that Etta Throop was such a wild and reckless person as the girl who proceeded to disclose herself to the wild and reckless Ben Hillman.

She was a pioneer "girl of the period" with a vengeance.

"Well, it's all in a lifetime," she said lightly. "If my brother comes out safe, I don't care whether school keeps or not."

"Don't you care for the rest, then?" inquired her captor.

"Not a continental. They are too slow and steady-going a set to suit me, and I am tired to death of being housed up on that wretched ranch. What's the use of living if a girl can't have her fling and see a little fun?"

"Your head is level," observed the young desperado, chuckling to himself as he thought of the prize he had captured.

"You may just bet your sweet life it is, and that's why I say that I didn't care whether school keeps or not, if my brother comes out safe. A short life and a merry one is my motto; but on that measly ranch there was no chance for a girl but to dry up and blow away."

"You are better off now," suggested Ben.

"I don't know about that. I have seen your partner—the man they call Devil Dick—and I don't like his looks for a cent. I am afraid of him, and don't a bit relish the idea of going to meet him or having anything to do with him. The poky old ranch might be better than that. If it was you, now—"

Her words and tone suggested to Ben Hillman a possibility of which he had been oblivious.

Here was a jolly girl, with nothing starchy or stuck up about her—a girl who was tired of being cooped and confined, and who was glad of a chance at a free and adventurous life—not at all the sort of a girl he had expected to be bothered with when he was sent on his nefarious errand.

He was not going to be pestered by any tears or reproaches or agony of any sort, and the abduction began to take on the appearance of nothing worse than an unusual form of elopement.

He might not have chuckled if he had known that in reality she was inwardly consumed not only by anxiety for the fate of her friends, but by a desire to be the death of the rascal to whom she had spoken so pleasantly.

"If it had been me—" he whispered, eagerly catching hold of the thought she had half expressed.

"Ah! if it had been a young and sprightly fellow like you, perhaps I might not grumble. Do you know, young chap, that this is an uneasy seat I have here? Suppose we light down and take a rest."

They were then in the hills, many miles from the Gonzalez valley, and her proposition seemed to be a safe one, and Ben Hillman saw no reason why he should not accede to it.

"All right," he answered, and he halted the horse in a pleasant and shady spot.

He alighted, and lifted her down from the horse, but did not loose her arms, though she hinted by her actions that she would be glad to have him do so.

He seated himself on the ground, invited her to take some whisky out of his flask, and helped himself liberally when she declined his hospitality.

She was willing that he should muddle himself, but meant to keep her own head clear.

"And so you think," he observed, "that if you must be gobbled up by anybody, you'd rather it would be me than my partner?"

"Well, I should smile," she slangily replied.

He sampled the contents of his flask again, and the whisky mounted to his head and gave him a clearer view of the possibilities of the situation.

Why should he not take this handsome and willing girl to himself, leave his partner in the lurch, and depart with her to "fresh fields and pastures new?"

There seemed to be nothing in the way of such a scheme except the lack of money or property that could be turned into money, all the funds of the partnership being under the control of Devil Dick.

She must have read his thoughts as he sat there, as she responded to them readily.

"It is a pity," she said, "that I had not known you better, and that you had not told me what you meant to do before we started."

"Why so?" he inquired.

"Because I have a few hundred dollars there at the house, and we might have brought it along. Can't we go back and get it?"

This was a great temptation to the desperado; but she had hardly spoken when she perceived that she had gone a bit too far and aroused his suspicions.

"Ain't you playing it a little too fine?" he remarked. "Do you want to get me back there so that your friends can catch me if they should happen along?"

"What do you take me for?" she peevishly replied. "I had not thought of that. I was only thinking how handy the money would be. Well, it don't matter, I suppose; but there are chances that don't come along every day."

"We won't go back to the ranch, anyhow," said Hillman. "We will get right on that horse and ride along."

He mounted his horse and lifted her up before him, and they went on further up into the hills.

Silently they rode then, or nearly so, the former conversation not being renewed except by brief hints that Etta Throop occasionally threw out.

These hints gave him to understand that she was displeased at his suspicions and his conduct generally.

She doubtless thought that she would give the

whisky and her former words a good chance to work upon him.

They were working, and were continually bringing up the thought that he might take her away and keep her for himself.

It would be a shameful deed to desert his partner, the man who had twice saved his life; but, as the girl had said, there were chances that did not come along every day.

It was he who proposed, when they had got a considerable distance into the hills, that they should stop to rest and eat a bite.

He had no tempting viands to offer his companion; but a little hard bread and whisky might be acceptable to people who had traveled far and eaten nothing.

When they alighted she did not make any direct allusion to her state of bondage, but intimated a desire to taste the contents of the whisky-flask.

"All right," responded Hillman, as he handed it to her.

"But how can I drink it," she wanted to know, "when my hands are tied?"

"That's so. I reckon I'd better untie them. It don't seem as if I ought to be afraid of such a girl as you. You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

"I couldn't if I wanted to," she answered.

Yet it was possible that she might.

She saw a revolver in his belt, and there was at least a chance to snatch it.

Besides, she had a smaller weapon of her own, with which she might shoot him if an opportunity should offer, and it was one of the cases in which killing would be no murder.

As there was no immediate chance for decisive action of any kind, she raised the flask to her mouth and appeared to drink, though not a drop of the liquor passed her lips.

"That's right," said the young desperado. "I'm glad to see you drink hearty. It'll do you good, and it proves that you're the right sort."

He seated himself on a rock, and proceeded to help himself freely to the whisky.

She could have shot him then; but there might be a better chance.

"I can't help thinking," she said, in a tone of real regret, "that it would have been a good scheme to go back to the ranch and get my money."

"Oh, we can get along well enough without it," answered her companion.

She had first used the word "we," and it had got into his head with the whisky, and it seemed to him to be quite the easy and proper thing to throw his partner over and clear out with the fair captive.

"What can we do with one horse?" she demanded. "And where is the money to come from?"

"There's more ways than one to get hold of a horse, and more ways than one to get hold of money, too. If luck should be too hard, I could sell this gun of mine for quite a pile. It's as fine a shooter as I ever set eyes on."

"Let me see it," said Etta, as she held out her hand.

Her tone and action were so natural that they made her request seem a mere matter of course, and Ben Hillman handed her the pistol at once.

No sooner had he done so than he repented the incautious act.

She stepped back quickly, cocking the pistol as she did so, and the baffled desperado faced his own leveled revolver.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THEY DREW THE LINE.

BEN HILLMAN beheld with amazement the sudden transformation in the young woman who stood before him.

She was no longer the careless and slangy girl who had lately cajoled him—the willing captive who had been glad to escape from a "measly ranch," and whose only regret had been that he was taking her to his partner.

She was then the Etta Throop who had rushed out to seize her brother's rifle and take a man's part in the fight against Jack Koopman's raiders.

As she backed away from him toward the horse, there could be no doubt of her purpose.

With his amazement was mingled anger at his folly and shortsightedness, and to this was added a desperate desire to retrieve his position.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, as he started up from his seat on the rock.

"Business!" was her stern reply. "You had better stay where you are."

But he was not going to stay where he was.

Whisky and the knowledge of what he was losing made him reckless.

Besides his antagonist was nothing but a girl, and why should he not frighten and overpower her?

Etta Throop, with that revolver in her hand, was not to be scared by an unarmed man.

"Halt there!" she commanded, as he started to follow her. "I don't want to hurt you; but I will shoot you down if you stir another step."

She meant it—there could be no question of that—but he thought he saw a chance to defeat her purpose.

"It ain't loaded," he said, with a sneer, as he boldly stepped forward.

"We'll see about that," was her quick answer, and as quickly she pulled the trigger.

The result proved to her, as she knew it would, that the desperado had lied, and his leg caught the bullet which she had sent to maim him.

With a cry and a curse he stumbled and fell forward.

She had been near the horse when she fired the shot, and with a spring she was in the saddle.

Hastily securing the pistol, she gave the horse the rein, and away he flew at headlong speed.

She did not care to check him; indeed, she urged him on, and shouted to him as he dashed and bounded over the rocks and among the boulders.

This was not because she feared or even expected pursuit.

She well knew that Ben Hillman was disabled and was not likely to make the least attempt to follow her, even if he could have hoped to pursue her without a horse.

The truth was that she was exalted by a sense of freedom and safety; that her escape from a frightful peril had so excited her, that she was scarcely conscious of what she was doing.

Of course a revulsion came.

Her strength could no longer bear the tension to which it had been subjected, and she felt herself giving way.

She was only able to pull up the fine horse she rode, and to speak to him soothingly.

The intelligent animal halted at once, and she slid from his back to the ground, still clutching the bridle, which he allowed to slip over his head.

She fainted as she fell, and lay there motionless and senseless in a swoon, which was probably the best condition for her just then.

It was the horse that roused her at last.

He had made no attempt to break the light hold of her nerveless hand, but had stood by her, showing symptoms of impatience now and then, but on the whole with commendable steadiness.

At last, as if he had had enough of that sort of thing, he put his head down and nosed about her face.

This action awoke her, and with an effort she sat up and looked around.

Where was she, and what had happened to her? At first she was dazed and unable to account for her position; but gradually the truth came back to her.

Naturally the horse started her recollection, and then the discovery of Ben Hillman's handsome revolver completed the chain.

Her peril and escape came back to her with a rush, and she knew that she was free and possessed of the means of further flight.

Her thoughts at once flew to home and friends, and she was filled with an eager desire to return to the ranch and learn the fate of those who were near and dear to her.

Unable then to spring into the saddle, she led the horse to a rock, mounted him leisurely, and rode down through the hills, hoping to find an exit in the right direction.

It was then after sunset, as well as her position allowed her to judge, and she knew that darkness would come very swiftly.

It was necessary, therefore, that she should make the best possible use of her time, and she endeavored to do so.

Fate was against her, as it seemed, and when she had ridden until darkness shut her in without finding any way out of the tangle, she was obliged to confess almost despairingly that she was lost.

She had then the choice of two plans—to stop and wait for day, or to keep on blindly in the hope of finding a way out.

The first was not to be thought of while life and strength remained in her.

So she determined to give the horse the rein, trusting to the instinct or intelligence of the animal to extricate her from that predicament and take her to a place of safety.

The horse seemed to know what this meant.

He chirruped as if he understood the situation, and started off in a different direction from that which his rider had been endeavoring to follow.

Etta made no further attempt to control him, but let him have his own way, believing that he knew what he was about.

The danger was that he would go home—if Ben Hillman could be supposed to have a home; but that was a risk which she had determined to run.

After about two hours' travel, during which time the horse went straight on without faltering, he came out on a plateau where there was a habitation.

It was evidently a ranch of considerable size and importance, with a roomy dwelling house, a large corral, and numerous outbuildings.

Surely the lost girl must find friends at such a place, and it pleased her to perceive that, though the hour was by no means an early one, there were men moving about, as if engaged in some belated employment.

She was riding up to the house to state her case and ask assistance, when the door was opened, and a man came out hastily.

It needed but a glance at that man to tell her that she had gone from a bad predicament to a worse, from the frying-pan into the fire.

He was Jack Koopman, the cattle baron who had raided the ranch in the valley, and whom she had helped to fight.

He recognized her as soon as she recognized him, and was even more amazed than she was.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What's this? That squatter girl, by Judas! How did she ever get here? Now that she's come, we'll keep her. Hi, boys! Stop her there!"

Etta Throop had turned her horse, and was about to leave the premises, when she found her way barred by a ring of cowboys.

A bronzed and stalwart young fellow stepped up and seized her bridle-rein.

She drew Ben Hillman's revolver with the intention of fighting for her freedom; but the young man held up a warning finger and spoke to her gently:

"Easy, miss! What kin we do fur you?"

"Show me the way to the Gonzalez valley," she answered.

"All right, miss."

"What are you doing there, Abner?" shouted Jack Koopman. "I've got an account to settle with that jade. Bring her here!"

"Not much, boss," quietly replied Abner.

"We didn't hire for that sort o' thing."

"Bring her here, I say! If you turn her loose I'll shoot the horse she's on."

The cattle baron drew a pistol, but was quickly and quietly disarmed by his men.

"What do you mean by this?" he roared. "She is a horse-thief. That horse is the one I gave Ben Hillman, and she must have stolen it. Bring her here, I say!"

"Not much, boss," again answered Abner.

"We are all willin' to do a heap o' things that mebbe we ortn't to do; but we draw the line at sech as this, and we draw it tight. The Gonzalez valley is down that way, miss. It's a plain trail, and all you've got to do is to follow it."

Releasing his hold upon the bridle, he took off his hat and bowed as the young lady rode away in the direction he pointed out to her.

Jack Koopman, rendered helpless by the opposition of his men, devoted himself to a severe course of cursing, and the very air seemed to turn blue with profanity behind the disappearing figure.

The moon had risen, and Etta Throop had no trouble in finding the trail and following it.

With renewed hope she urged the horse forward, though he was manifestly unwilling to get away from the good quarters to which he had returned, and in the course of a few hours descended into a broad valley, which she believed to be that of the Gonzalez.

It was a consolation to find herself there; but she was still in a dilemma, as she had not the least idea of the direction of her home.

As she halted, considering this question, without finding any answer, she was startled by the tramp of a horse near by.

She could not expect to find a friend there at that hour, and any person she might meet was necessarily an enemy to be avoided.

By this time she had endured so much, and was so completely worn out by fatigue and lack of food, that any further exertion was impossible.

She tottered in her saddle as the horseman drew near, and uttered a faint cry as the moonlight revealed a familiar face.

"Chinquapin!"

The lad had rode up and caught her in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

GONZALEZ STIRRED UP.

WHEN Jephtha Jones met his returning friends and communicated to them the sad news of the disappearance of Etta Throop, their consternation was only equalled by their grief.

This alone was needed to complete the chapter of calamities that had overtaken them that day, and it was surely enough.

George Throop was driven frantic by the blow, but was with difficulty persuaded to restrain himself, as it was thought best that the evil tidings should be kept as long as possible from Walter Brandis, whose condition might not enable him to bear up under it.

It was late in the afternoon when the mournful cavalcade reached the ranch, and then it appeared that there were no discoveries to be made beyond the simple fact that Jephtha Jones had learned, and that nothing could be immediately done toward searching for Etta Throop.

There were plenty of horse-tracks about the house, some of them apparently fresher than others; but there was such a network of them leading in all directions, that to fix upon any one trail out of the many would be the merest guesswork.

Chinquapin, who could not have been restrained if anybody had wished to restrain him, had ideas of his own concerning the disappearance of the young lady, and proceeded without delay to act upon them.

After a few words of explanation, he mounted his horse and rode across the valley.

Walter Brandis, helpless and almost unconscious, was carried into the house where the

lost girl had left the door open, and was laid on a bed and made as comfortable as possible.

As soon as he was able to speak and comprehend his position, he inquired for Etta.

It seemed so natural that she should be there to receive and attend upon him, that her absence caused him the greatest perplexity.

So persistent were his inquiries that it was necessary to tell him the truth, and it was broken to him as gently as possible.

Mildly as that terrible truth was stated, it proved to be too much for him.

He seemed to give up then, losing his hold upon life, and sunk into a lethargy, from which it was difficult to arouse him.

George Throop was very restless, finding himself unable to remain at the ranch while there was a possibility of doing anything to discover and rescue his sister.

Nobody believed that there was the faintest chance for him to accomplish anything, as there was no trail and night was coming on; but nobody thought of dissuading him from the purpose that would not allow him to rest.

He mounted and set out with one of the circus men, followed by the best wishes of the others, though to all recurred vividly the sad picture of the pursuit that had ended in the discovery of the corpse of Chinquapin's sister.

Jephtha Jones also had business to attend to in connection with the search, but it was of a more practical character and promised better results, though time would be required to work them out.

His plan, moreover, was the one that was advised and commended by Lieutenant Cripps.

When he had done what he could to make his friend comfortable, he left the ranch and the wounded man in charge of Cripps and the others, and set out for Gonzalez, to get a physician for Walter Brandis, and to report the latest outrage of Devil Dick and his gang.

Though it was late at night when he reached the town—or, rather, early in the morning, he soon stirred up such an excitement among the people of Gonzalez as they had not known in a long time.

The death of one man and the serious wounding of another by the murderous ruffians might not have roused Gonzalez thoroughly; but the abduction of Etta Throop woke up the town for all it was worth.

She was so well known and so warmly admired there, that every white man in Gonzalez—not counting, of course, the Mexicans and Indians—felt a personal interest in her loss and an ardent desire to rescue or avenge her.

A physician was sent to the ranch with an escort, and then a public meeting was held on the plaza, the saloons willingly contributing to the excitement by keeping open for the accommodation of the thirsty citizens.

It was the unanimous opinion of the meeting, abundantly and forcibly expressed, that the time had come when a full stop must be put to the depredations of Devil Dick and his partner, and all who were associated with them in their nefarious operations.

Coupled with the names of Devil Dick and his partner were those of Jack Koopman and some of his men, and the cattle larcen was mentioned in a manner that might have seriously disturbed the equanimity of that solid but rather objectionable citizen.

"Thar's got to be some hangin' done," was the way Sheriff Mabry summed up the situation. "The sooner we git at it the better, and I don't know but I may as well say that the more we do of it the better, too."

The result of the hasty deliberations was that within an hour after his arrival at Gonzalez, Jephtha Jones left the town accompanied by twenty men under the leadership of the sheriff.

All were picked men—all were well-mounted and armed to the teeth, and all were determined to make such a finish of the business they were engaged in as should relieve them of the necessity of undertaking another job of the same kind very soon.

As an earnest of their good intentions they carried some light but strong ropes that were admirably adapted for hanging purposes.

The moon was shining when this formidable party rode forth from Gonzalez, and it was after daylight when they reached the Throop Ranch.

In the mean time something had occurred at the house that gave the circus man and his friends a joyful surprise on their arrival.

The physician and his escort had arrived from Gonzalez, and Lieut. Cripps, who had been watching the wounded man almost despairingly, started out to receive them.

As he did so he looked across the valley, and the moonlight showed him something that made his heart bound and quickly revived his nearly exhausted energies.

It was a small party descending the slope on the other side and approaching the ranch.

There were four persons in the party, and three of them were men—no doubt of that—and the fourth—could he believe his eyes? Yes, it was surely a woman!

He pointed out the party to the physician, who was clearly of the opinion that the fourth person was a woman, and there could be no doubt that they were friends, as they were waving and gesticulating to the group at the house.

"You may go in and examine the wounded man," said the cavalry officer, "and I will join you shortly. If I am not greatly mistaken there is somebody coming yonder who will do more for him than all your skill can effect."

Charley Cripps was not mistaken.

In the approaching party were Etta Throop and Chinquapin, and with them were George Throop and his companion, whom they had met as they were descending the valley.

From those who were with her the young lady had learned all that had befallen her friends, and there was nothing for Lieut. Cripps to do but to congratulate her on her safe return, which he did so feelingly that she could not restrain her tears.

When the physician had examined Walter Brandis she was permitted to go in and see the wounded man, and she took her place at his side, as a matter of course, seeming to forget at once all the trouble and fatigue she had undergone.

It was apparent, too, that as soon as Walter Brandis was made aware of her presence his symptoms changed for the better, and the Gonzalez physician declared that good care and nursing would soon put him out of the reach of danger.

This was the pleasant surprise that awaited Jephtha Jones and the men from Gonzalez on their arrival at the ranch, and it was more than joyful for one and all of them.

Not only was it a great relief to their feelings, but it made their task much simpler and easier by freeing them from the necessity of searching for the lost girl.

Her story, as it was told to them, raised her to the rank of a heroine, and their admiration for her was immensely increased by the skill and courage which she had exhibited in escaping from the toils of her abductor.

At the same time her escape did not render them any the less eager to apprehend and punish Devil Dick and his partner.

On the contrary, the account of her peril and suffering made them all the more anxious to execute speedy vengeance upon that precious pair of scoundrels.

So they gave themselves a breakfast at the Throop House, and mounted and rode across the valley, their first objective point being Jack Koopman's ranch.

Lieut. Cripps accompanied them, with Jephtha Jones and Chinquapin, leaving the soldiers and the rest of the circus men with George Throop to rest and to guard the house.

Before he mounted the cavalry officer went in to take a look at Walter Brandis, and when Etta Throop stepped out for a moment he bent down and spoke to the wounded man.

"I almost wish I could be in your fix, old boy," said he.

Walter's eyes spoke an inquiry.

"Oh, you know why. I wouldn't object to a pretty bad gunshot wound if I could have her to take care of me."

The wounded man smiled faintly.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

JACK KOOPMAN'S GUESTS.

BEN HILLMAN had been in many tight places in the course of a life that had been largely spent in conflict with the laws, and had experienced some severe reverses of fortune; but it may be doubted whether he was ever more thoroughly "done down," as he would have expressed it, than when Etta Throop rode away from him with his horse and his revolver.

It was bad enough to be beaten, but to be so utterly overthrown by a girl was simply shameful.

It was his own fault, too; he could not help admitting that; and he had nobody but himself to blame.

He had suffered her to lead him on, and had most willingly been led by her, until she had brought him to the edge of a precipice and dropped him over, leaving him in "the low grounds of sorrow" and the depths of a quite unavailing anger.

If he had obeyed the instructions he had received, simply adhering to them as he might easily have done, all this trouble would have been avoided; but he had allowed the fascinations of his fair captive, mixed with considerable whisky, to get into his head and upset everything.

He will know that his end of the plot was regarded by Devil Dick as the important end.

Some of the girl's friends might have been killed in the trap into which they were to be led; but they had been drawn away mainly for the purpose of causing her capture.

He had begun well, but had ended most miserably.

The worst of it was that he had been thrown into the difficulty by his mad desire to cheat his partner and secure for himself the main result of the nefarious operations of the day.

Of course he was not compelled to disclose that side of the business to Devil Dick, and he had not the least intention of so doing; but he would be obliged to account in some way for the loss of his captive, and the best excuse he could make would be a lame one.

The end of the wretched affair was that he

found himself afoot and unarmed, as well as disabled by a bullet-hole in his leg where Etta Throop had shot him.

Naturally he attended to the wound the first thing, stopping the flow of blood, and binding it up so that he could walk with difficulty.

As it happened he was not far from Jack Koopman's ranch, though Etta took such a roundabout way to get there, and he knew the shortest and easiest route to reach it.

He cut a stick to aid his locomotion, and slowly and painfully worked his way thither, stopping every now and then to rest and to relieve his mind by the use of vigorous rhetoric.

He reached the ranch shortly after the young lady had been there and gone away safely.

Several of the cowboys were still up and about, and Jack Koopman was on his porch fretting and fuming, full of wrath at the escape of the Throop girl, and yet more angry at the insubordination of his retainers.

He greeted the arrival of the wounded desperado with a storm of curses.

Stripped of those expletives his violent talk amounted to a demand that the man should tell where he had come from and what he had been doing.

Ben Hillman, who was completely exhausted as well as thoroughly ashamed of himself, began to stammer a reply, but was immediately checked.

"Don't give me any lies, you good for nothing galoot!" exclaimed the enraged cattle baron. "I know what has happened. That girl has been here, and she rode your horse up to this very door."

"Where is she now?" Ben Hillman ventured to inquire.

"Gone away safe and sound. These cursed sons of cattle-thieves wouldn't stop her or let me do it, but put her in the trail and sent her on her way rejoicing."

This piece of information was perhaps a relief to the desperado, as he could at least be sure that she would not tell of his treachery in that quarter.

He staggered to a seat, and found breath to ask another question.

"Where's Dick?"

"Don't know," gruffly responded Koopman.

"Reckon he has made a botch of his part of the business, too. No sort of good luck is to be expected any more. How did that girl give you the slip and get away with your horse?"

"I had stopped to give her a rest, as she was all fagged out," answered Hillman, "and she sneaked up and shot me through the leg."

Jack Koopman regarded the speaker with the most intense disgust.

"She did?" he sneered. "That girl? And she was all fagged out, too? That is the worst I ever heard in this world of wonders. And what was a man of your size and style doing while she was playing that game?"

"I wasn't watching for anything of that kind. Who would have looked for it? But I am right bad hurt, Jack, and—and—"

He would have fallen over if his companion had not propped him up and administered the readiest remedy in the shape of a drink of whisky.

"As you are here and helpless," said the cattle baron, "I suppose I will have to take care of you; but I do wish that the infernal jade had shot you through the head and made a finish of you."

Koopman called his retainers to the assistance of the wounded desperado.

"They took him into a back room and put him to bed, and one of them who was something of a rough surgeon dressed his leg and gave him a drink of whisky for a composing draught."

The cattle baron remained out on the porch cursing this new mishap and solacing himself with abundant liquors and cigars.

He had not succeeded in drowning his wrath when Devil Dick rode up with the men who had accompanied him on his raid—that is to say, with those of them who were left.

"Well, old man, what bad news have you brought?" demanded Koopman, as the leader dismounted and came to him.

He knew that it would never do to treat this tall and stalwart desperado as roughly as he had treated his partner; but he could not help showing his ill-humor, all the same.

"What makes you think that I have brought any bad news?" responded Devil Dick, as he helped himself to a seat, not forgetting the bottle that was so handy.

"Because I don't look for any other sort of news nowadays," growled the cattle baron.

"Well, you're not far wrong, pard. My news is not as good as I wish it was, though I have done my best, and so did all the boys."

"Spit it right out, Dick. Tell me the worst there is of it."

"Oh, it's not particularly bad, only not so good as it might have been—that's all. I got those squatters in a trap, and would have wiped out the last one of them if it hadn't been for the United States of America."

"So that scallawag turned up again," observed Koopman, as an expression of disgust overspread his coarse features.

"Indeed he did, just when he wasn't wanted, and with his squad of blue-coats."

"I'd be glad to have the hanging of that conceited and meddlesome sneak."

"That's easy to say, pard, but the scheme wouldn't work. For my part, I will be glad enough to keep my own neck out of a noose. He turned up at the wrong time, as I said, just when I had those squatters exactly where I wanted them. We had laid out more than one of them, I know; but when he sailed in we had to drop all holds and skedaddle. It seems as if luck is dead against me right straight along."

"That's what I was looking for, and the cursed cavalryman has put the cap sheaf on."

"Why, it's not so bad, Jack. I've hit them hard, anyhow, and I drew the whole crowd of them away from the ranch, so that Ben Hillman had a splendid chance to sneak up and steal the girl, and I reckon he's got her safe."

"Safe?" growled Koopman. "Not much."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to say that the girl came riding by here shortly after moon-up, on the horse I gave Ben Hillman, and that after a while he came sneaking in, with a hole in his leg that you might put your thumb in, and his story was that the female critter had shot him and run off with his horse. He is in the back room there now, as badly played out a specimen of the scamp tribe as you would care to see."

Devil Dick's face turned more than dark—it was positively black with passion.

"I want to see him," said he.

"Go and hunt him, then. You know where to find him. He is no friend of mine."

The big desperado strode into the room where his wounded partner was lying.

Ben Hillman, rudely aroused from a stupor, was in a half-dazed condition when he faced the partner whom he had sought to betray.

In response to the savage questioning of Devil Dick he told about the same story that he had told to Jack Koopman.

His statements were received with utter disgust and emphatic incredulity.

"You don't know that girl, Dick," he feebly protested. "She is a terror. She is as sly as a snake and as quick as a wildcat. How could I think that she was going to spring a shooter on me as she did?"

"Bah! You pretend to be a man, and let such a whiffet of a girl get the best of you! I would give considerable to know what it really was that you were thinking of just then. Where did she get the gun that she shot you with?"

"She had it hid about her, somewhere; and I had never thought that she might be carrying such a thing."

"Just so. And where was your six-shooter that you thought so much of?"

"I dropped it when I fell, and she picked it up and ran away with it."

"That will do," sternly replied Devil Dick; "I don't believe a word you say. You are neither a coward nor a fool, and I have no doubt that you have been playing some game at which you deserved to be beat, even by a girl. I don't expect to squeeze the truth out of you, but I can guess enough of it to feel sure that what you've got is less than you ought to have. Twice I have saved your worthless life, Ben Hillman, and you have said again and again that you would be willing to die for me, and this is the way you keep your word. It would serve you right if Jack Koopman should kick you out and drive you away. For my part, I've done with you."

Leaving his recent partner in no enviable frame of mind, the big desperado went out and rejoined Jack Koopman, to whom he made known his opinion of Ben Hillman in few but very vigorous words.

"I told him," said he, "that I wouldn't care if you should kick him out."

"I wish he wasn't here, and that's a fact," responded the cattle baron; "but I can't exactly kick him out. I don't want you to stay here either, Dick. It ain't safe for you or for me. That double performance of yours and his is apt to kick up a deuce of a row about here, and there's no telling when the soldiers or some other crowd may come here hunting you. I reckon you had better leak out."

"All right, Jack. That's my notion, too. But there's no call to be in a hurry. I am going to lie down here and get a good snooze, and you can look out for me. I don't need to tell you what to do."

Jack Koopman, who had been a soldier in his day, sent out several of his retainers to picket all the roads leading to the ranch, and told Devil Dick that he might rest in peace.

The proprietor of the ranch and the rest of the men sought repose, and Devil Dick did rest in peace, sleeping as soundly as if he had no trouble on his mind and no crime on his conscience.

It was not until near noon of the following day that he was aroused.

Then some of the pickets came in and announced "a big gang of men comin' from Gonzalez way."

"You'll have to light out in a hurry, Dick," said the ranchman, and the desperado was almost instantly in his saddle.

"I reckon I can hide that cuss in there," continued Koopman. "Where do you think you will bring up?"

"I am going to Jim Allen's Hole. It would puzzle them to find me there if they should search all through the hills."

Devil Dick rode off at a gallop, and was well out of the way when the men from Gonzalez came in sight.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BEN HILLMAN'S FATE.

When Sheriff Mabry and his party reached the Koopman Ranch, they found everything moving on as if in the natural and regular way.

On the surface, at least, there was nothing to arouse their suspicions.

The cattle baron was directing the slaughter of a steer for beef, and he made a point of greeting the visitors pleasantly, if not hilariously, urging them to dismount and stay a while.

The alacrity with which they accepted this invitation almost before it was tendered must have convinced him that they had special business there.

"I am ever so glad to see you folks," he said, when he had ordered the usual refreshments to be placed before them; "but I can't help wondering what has brought you here. Has there been any excitement down your way?"

"Yes, somethin' in that line," answered Sheriff Mabry. "We came here to look for Devil Dick—Colonel Double-edge, the outlaw."

"Devil Dick?" inquired the ranchman with an air of innocence that ought to have imposed upon his visitors.

"Yes—or Dick March, or whatever you may choose to call him. You know him well enough."

"Oh, that chap. Yes, I know him, or did know him. He used to come around here quite a while ago, but Lieutenant Cripps there told me what kind of a character he was, and I shut down on him. I haven't seen him for ever so long."

"Sure of that?"

"Of course I am. I don't know anything about the man any more."

"That's queer. He was raising Cain down in the Gonzalez valley yesterday, and had some of your men to help him."

"Some of my men? You astonish me. Well, that may be so, for all I know. I pick my men up as I can get them, and don't pretend to vouch for their moral characters or to control them in any way. So long as they do the work that I pay them to do, that is all I have to look out for. If you think you can find any of those men you speak of about here, you are welcome to look for them."

The men who had been concerned in Devil Dick's raid, were of course conveniently out of the way, and it may be doubted if anybody could have identified them if they had been present.

No attempt was made to search for them, as the Gonzalez posse was after other game.

Lieutenant Cripps stepped forward to confront the cattle baron, and in his hand he held concealed a small scrap of woolen cloth.

He looked curiously at the coat which the burly ranchman was wearing.

"And so you haven't seen Devil Dick in a long time?" he observed.

"That's what I said," was the gruff reply.

"How did it happen, then, that he wore your coat a while ago, when he went to Gonzalez in disguise, and helped his partner, Ben Hillman, to break jail there, and carried him away?"

"My coat? What do you mean?"

"The coat you have on now. I came upon that scoundrel as he was letting his partner out of the Gonzalez jail, and grabbed him. He knocked me senseless with a heavy stick he carried; but I tore off a piece of the lapel of the coat he wore, and here it is. Let me see."

By a quick motion the cavalryman applied the bit of woolen cloth to a torn place in the coat worn by Jack Koopman, and it was evident to all present that it had once belonged there.

"This man," said Lieutenant Cripps, as he turned to his friends, "is Devil Dick's side partner. If there is any hanging to be done, I don't know but he deserves it as much as anybody."

"What's that, young man?" roared the cattle baron. "You had better be careful what you say."

"I am careful," replied Cripps. "I know just what I am saying. That coat tells the story of your connection with the cut-throat, Devil Dick."

"The coat? Well, there is something queer about that, and I am just beginning to understand it. I have been wondering how it happened to get torn, and nobody about the place could tell me. Dick March must have stopped in here while I was away and borrowed it without my permission. It would be just like that scoundrel to play me such a trick."

Lieut. Cripps turned away, evidently disgusted with the ranchman's evasion.

"That won't do, Jack Koopman," broke in Sheriff Mabry. "There ain't a man of us who believes a word you say, and you don't believe

it, and it's too thin to talk of. We know that you have been Devil Dick's side partner, and that you deserve hangin'; but we ain't ready to 'tend to your case yet. We are after the boss rascal, and if he is anywhere about here, we mean to find him."

"You are welcome to search the ranch," replied Koopman, who was quite cut down by this obstinate unbelief; "but you won't find any such person here."

"That's jest what we mean to do, whether we're welcome or not."

The search was speedily and thoroughly made, and of course it soon resulted in the discovery of Ben Hillman.

That forlorn desperado was easily recognized by several of the visiting party, and especially by Sheriff Mabry, in whose custody he had been before he escaped from the jail at Gonzalez.

He was hastily brought out, complaining of his wounded leg, and protesting against such rough treatment, and was confronted with the cattle baron.

Jack Koopman had naturally expected this, and was prepared with a story to account for Ben Hillman's presence there.

"What have you got to say to this, you big sneak?" demanded Mabry. "You said that we wouldn't find any such person as Devil Dick here. This is his partner, and if he ain't somethin' like such a person, I don't know what such means?"

"That poor devil?" contemptuously replied the ranchman. "Do you mean to say that he is Dick March's partner?"

"You know he is. Don't you know that he was in jail at Gonzalez charged with stage robbery and murder, and that Devil Dick broke the jail and turned him loose?"

"I may have heard something of the kind; but I don't take much notice of the yarns I hear."

"I reckon we will find a way to make you take notice of some of them before we are through with you. How do you account for this man's presence in your house?"

"Easy enough. The poor cuss came crawling in here last night, shot through the leg and completely used up. He said that his horse had run away from him and thrown him, and that his pistol had gone off in the fall and accidentally shot him. I knew nothing about the man, except that he was hurt and in trouble, and I took him in and cared for him. Wouldn't you have done as much?"

This appeal to the sympathy of the party had its effect, though the ranchman's statement was not really believed.

"Was that the story you told when you came here?" was the question the sheriff put to the wounded culprit.

As he could gain nothing by harming the man who had befriended him, Ben Hillman declared that it was.

"We happen to know that it was a lie," said Jim Mabry. "We know that you were workin' with Devil Dick yesterday, and that your end of the game was to carry off a young lady while your partner got away with her friends. We know that it ain't no fault of yours that she is alive now and doin' well, while you are in this fix."

Ben Hillman was strongly inclined to believe that it was his fault; but he was not going to make matters worse by attempting any further explanation.

"That's a hangin' matter," continued the sheriff, "to say nothin' of the other crimes that stood ag'inst you. We are goin' to settle up with you now for the new and the old, and we can't afford to take you to Gonzalez jail, because that has been tried once."

"Do you mean to hang me?" faintly inquired the young desperado.

"That's about the size of it, but everything must be straight and lawful, and so I am going to take a vote on the question."

This the sheriff proceeded to do without any formality.

"All who are in favor of hangin' this rascal will please manifest the same by sayin' aye!"

The ayes had it unanimously, and the sheriff called for a rope, which was quickly forthcoming.

Jack Koopman had another word to put in.

"If you are really going to hang the man," said he, "I wish you would take him away from here. I don't want such a sight near my house."

"You don't, hey?" shouted Mabry, turning upon him more fiercely than ever. "Do you fancy that you've got any choice in the matter? The best thing you can do is to keep a still tongue in your head, for I swear to you, man, that it would take mighty little jest now to make us string you up there with your side-partner. We mean to hang him right in front of your door, as a solemn warning to you and all your gang, and there he's got to stay till we take him down. We will be back here afore long, and if he ain't hangin' there when we come, somebody'll have to suffer."

This was sufficient for the cattle baron, and he would have sneaked away if he had not been compelled to stay and witness the remainder of the proceedings.

Ben Hillman, the person most immediately

and deeply interested, had nothing to say for himself—no word of protest, request or entreaty.

He knew that the game was up with him, and perhaps thought, in his forlorn condition just then, that death would be the easiest and pleasantest way out of his difficulties.

Anyhow, it was certain that there was no other way, and he nerved himself, being no coward, to endure what he knew to be inevitable.

Once before he had stood with a rope around his neck, and again he had been shut up with no hope of release but through the halter.

Each time Col. Double-edge had been his friend in need, saving him from death at the risk of his own life; but this time there was no hope of rescue or relief, and he had only the sad reflection of knowing that he had brought his fate on himself through his betrayal of that faithful friend.

At the last he was true to the partner whom he had estranged.

When his hands had been bound, and the noose had been placed around his neck, and he had been led under the fatal tree, he was given a hope of mercy if he would lead his captors to Devil Dick's hiding-place.

He professed entire ignorance of the matter, and was run up with no further ceremony.

CHAPTER XL.

A CLOUD-BURST.

When it was certain that Ben Hillman's earthly career had been brought to an end, another effort was made to induce Jack Koopman to give information concerning the whereabouts of Dick Marsh; but he stubbornly declared that he knew nothing about the desperado or his hiding-places.

After again warning him to leave the body of the executed culprit where it was hanging, Sheriff Mabry and his party left the ranch and continued their journey into the hills.

They all were well aware of the fact that the remainder and the principal part of their task would be difficult in the extreme; but all were determined that it should be thoroughly performed, no matter how much time and effort it might require.

"We mean to fight it out on this line," said Jim Mabry, "if we have to camp in these hills for a solid month."

This sentiment met with general approbation, though it was hoped that the end might be reached without such a tedious search.

When they had got fairly into the tangle at the distance of several miles from the Koopman Ranch, Ben Hackett, an old hunter and guide, took charge of the party and laid out the campaign.

It was his plan that they should separate into squads and take different routes, hoping thus to surround the probable hiding-places of the fugitive and cut off his ways of exit.

A general place of rendezvous was appointed for the next day, which was understood by all, though all might not be equally able to find it.

It was near the close of day when the party divided and the several squads hastened away.

The squad with which Jephtha Jones was connected was composed of himself, Lieutenant Cripps and Chinquapin.

As the half-breed lad was their guide, they hoped to be able to do as efficient work as anybody.

When darkness came on they camped for the night near the edge of a deep gorge, as it was not considered worth while to attempt to go any further before morning.

They were astir at dawn, and decided that they would first explore the gorge that lay before them, as it seemed to offer good chances for the concealment of the fugitive whom they were seeking.

It was arranged that Lieutenant Cripps should take one side of the ravine, and Chinquapin the other, while the circus man should descend to the bottom and follow it up.

They thus expected to corral Devil Dick, or to drive him out at the head of the gorge, if he should be proved to have sought concealment there.

Leaving their horses at the camp, they took the positions agreed upon and began their search, keeping as nearly abreast of each other as the difficult nature of the ground would permit.

Lieutenant Cripps moved at a considerable distance above Jephtha Jones and to his left, but within easy rifle-range, while Chinquapin was similarly situated on his right, the difference being that the cavalryman's side of the gorge was very difficult of descent, and the half-breed's side was comparatively easy.

As it was desirable that the search should be pursued quietly, they had agreed that they would not shout to each other, but would communicate only by signs as far as possible.

When they had gone up the gorge a distance of half a mile or so, it suddenly became much steeper, as well as narrower and generally more difficult.

This hindered their communications with each other, while at the same time it tended to

prevent them from moving and acting in concert.

When the circus man was about to begin the ascent of the steepest part of the ravine, he thought that he saw thin wreaths of smoke curling up from behind a big rock a little way beyond him.

This smoke—if it really was smoke—surely indicated the presence of a man in the ravine, and it was reasonable to suppose that the man was no other than Devil Dick.

He tried to communicate with his friends and point out the suspicious smoke; but Lieut. Cripps was out of sight, and Chinguapin made signs to the effect that he had already perceived it.

Knowing that Chinguapin would not fail to take care of his side of the ravine, the circus man proceeded to climb the steep ascent at the bottom, moving as cautiously and silently as possible.

But the way was very rough, the bed of the ravine being choked up with bowlders and broken pieces of rock, and it was almost inevitable that some mishap should occur.

There was a racket when it was most important that quiet should be preserved.

A loose bowlder gave way under the circus man's feet, and went bounding down the incline.

At the same time he stumbled and fell forward.

At the same time, too, the sharp report of a rifle sounded near by and caused a sudden transformation scene.

Jep Jones, looking up from the spot where he had fallen, made two discoveries.

In the first place he noticed the vanishing smoke of the rifle-shot up at the left of the gorge, and knew that Lieut. Cripps had fired.

A second glance showed him the mark at which the cavalryman had fired, but which he had evidently missed.

A tall and dark figure suddenly started up near the rock from behind which the smoke had seemed to arise.

There was no chance for anybody to mistake that figure who had ever seen Colonel Double-edge or Jim Sartine.

The hunted man, quickly becoming aware of the fact that he was hunted, was instantly on the alert to discover his enemies and take an advantage of them.

There were two courses open for him to pursue, and he appeared to hesitate between them.

Being near the head of the ravine, where it began to spread out into a more open but still broken and tangled part of the hills, he might attempt to escape in that direction, the more easily if his horse happened to be near at hand.

His other chance was to kill or disable some of his pursuers, and thus free himself from them in the surest and most effective manner.

The latter plan was that which he evidently decided to adopt.

Unable to catch a view of the man who had fired at him from the side of the gorge, his hasty glance fell on Jep Jones as he was scrambling to his feet among the rough rocks of the incline, and he fired hastily at that rash intruder.

The circus man, however, had all his senses about him, and was quick enough to drop behind a convenient bowlder at the right time.

The desperado's bullet passed harmlessly over his head and splattered against a rock behind him.

Almost immediately he fired in his turn; but his shot was no more effective than that of his adversary had been.

These three shots gave all the parties in the drama, with the partial exception of Dick, an insight into the true condition of affairs, as well as a pretty good idea of the position of each.

Col. Double-edge quickly stepped within the cover of his rock, where he kept a wary watch upon hostile demonstrations.

Jep Jones perceived that any attempt on his part to advance against the common foe would subject him to the risk of being shot down, though he might crawl up carefully and possibly place himself in a better position for active operations.

In the mean time he felt able to keep up his end of the business, and he had no doubt that Lieut. Cripps and Chinguapin, each on his own side of the gorge, would do their best to flank the common foe or get in his rear.

The former was not visible just then, as he had a different route to travel and was obliged to keep carefully under cover; but the latter could be seen from the position of the circus man; who had no doubt that he was attending strictly to business.

There was also another piece of business to which the lad was attending just then, and it was a very serious affair.

A remarkable elemental disturbance had engaged his attention, as he was in a better position to see it than the others were, and they were too closely occupied with watching each other's movements to take notice of anything else.

The air had suddenly become very hot for the season, and was so close and heavy as to be quite oppressive.

As soon as Chinguapin felt the change he

knew what it meant, and looked about for its visible cause.

He found it in the Southwest, where a cloud as black as ink, small at first but rapidly growing, had begun to obscure the clear sky.

It advanced with almost incredible swiftiness, and when it hung over the hills its appearance was striking and terrible.

It seemed to be, in fact, a huge funnel, the mouth of which was purple and yellow, as if fires were burning within, and the other end as black as utter darkness.

So rapidly had it approached that it was almost over the lad's head before his gaze had fully taken it in and apprehended its significance.

Then he shouted to Jephtha Jones, down in the bottom of the gorge, and frantically signaled to him to come up out of there.

The circus man looked up, saw the black cloud, and hastened to seek a place of safety.

Col. Double-edge saw it at the same moment, and also started for the side of the gorge.

Just then the cloud burst, and a deluge of water poured down upon the thirsty hills.

It was not a rain, but an avalanche—a great clump of water that dropped as if a spring had opened the bottom of a tank.

It was such a soaker and such an astonisher that human efforts were unavailing while it lasted; but it was ended in a very brief space of time. The cloud had dropped its burden and passed on.

Immediately a gush of water began to come down the ravine, and everybody who was acquainted with such phenomena knew that the hollow would be quickly filled, or nearly so, by a rushing torrent.

Jephtha Jones, who was nearest to the side of the gorge, began to scramble up with an agility for which he must have been indebted to his practice as an acrobat.

Desperado Dick imitated the circus man's example to the best of his ability, and Chinguapin hastened to head off the desperado.

As his rifle had been rendered useless by the deluge of water, he decided upon climbing down to a point of vantage where he could club his enemy back into the boiling torrent.

The water had nearly reached the desperado's legs, and when he looked up and saw Chinguapin waiting for him with his clubbed rifle, he found himself "between the devil and the deep sea."

He drew a knife, gripped it between his teeth, and resolutely climbed upward.

At that moment an accident happened to his enemy.

A stone gave way under Chinguapin's feet, and he fell forward and downward.

As he fell he struck Colonel Double-edge, clinched him with a death grip, and both dropped into the raging torrent.

CHAPTER XLI.

"SOME OTHER MAN."

JEPHTHA JONES, when he had climbed to the edge of the gorge, well out of the way of the rushing mass of water, gazed down into it mournfully.

It went tearing and whistling by, snatching great stones from their places, and bearing on its swollen surface trunks of trees and a miscellaneous lot of debris; but he could see no sign of Chinguapin or Devil Dick March.

They had been swept away by the torrent, and there was not the faintest chance that any living thing could have survived the flood.

Lieut. Cripps appeared on the other side, and the circus man signaled to him.

It was useless to shout and tell him what had happened, as it was evident from his manner that he had witnessed the double catastrophe.

Shortly the water in the gorge began to subside, and within a little more than half an hour it had entirely disappeared, with the exception of little pools that were left in hollows.

The sky was clear and the sun was bright, and it was hard to realize the fact of the recent tragedy.

Jep Jones signaled to Lieut. Cripps, and the two comrades descended into the ravine and began a search for the bodies of their friend and their enemy.

They found three rifles under and among the rocks and rubbish—Devil Dick's, Chinguapin's, and the circus man's—all more or less injured by water and rough usage.

A little further up they found a heavy black horse, that had drowned where it had been hitched.

Then they followed down the course of the recent torrent; but it was not until they had traversed it fully half a mile that they found the bodies they were seeking.

They were lodged in a hollow at a considerable distance from the steep incline, against a barrier of rock that had partially broken the force of the flood.

The body of Colonel Double-edge had been badly bruised and disfigured by the rough usage of the torrent; but that of Chinguapin was scarcely harmed, and his features would have been as peaceful as in sleep, except for an expression of vengeful hate that had come into them and abided there.

Both his hands were tightly clasped around the neck of his enemy, doubtless just as they had fastened there when he had fallen upon him.

The brave fellow had avenged the death of his sister, but at the cost of his own life.

Lieut. Cripps agreed to remain there and watch them while Jep Jones went to find Sheriff Mabry and the remainder of the party.

This was a task of no little difficulty, as they were widely scattered; but he succeeded in finding a few of them, whom he brought to the ravine, leaving a man at the rendezvous named by Ben Hackett to notify the others of what had happened.

The body of Devil Dick the dreaded Colonel Double-edge was left to the birds and beasts of prey; but Chinguapin was tenderly carried up out of the ravine and placed on his own horse.

With this sorrowful load the lad's friends went on to the rendezvous, where they were joined during the afternoon by the rest of the party, all glad that their task was finished and that an end had been put to the career of Devil Dick.

As their nearest way home was by Jack Koopman's ranch, they naturally took it in, and the entire party stopped there, greatly to the displeasure of the proprietor, who made no effort to welcome them.

The body of Ben Hillman was swinging in the evening air from a tree in front of the house showing that the command of the Vigilantes had been strictly obeyed.

Jim Mabry, having obtained the unanimous consent of the others, made a brief address to the cattle baron.

"Jack Koopman, do you see the poor lad who is lyin' dead on that hoss? He is the last of those who have lost their lives because of your pard, Colonel Double-edge; but no more will die that way, as the infamous scoundrel is wiped out. He won't do any more harm in this world. One of your side partners, Jack Koopman, lies dead in Jim Allen's Hole, and the other swings from that tree. You deserve to die just as much as either of 'em, but the proof ain't so clear ag'inst you. You kin take down that carr'on now as soon as you want to, and we have agreed to give you two weeks to take yourself and your stuff out o' the Territory. We don't want you here any longer, and this is your notice to quit. See that you mind it."

The crestfallen Koopman had nothing to say, and the party rode on.

Before the two weeks were up he had disappeared from that region, horse and foot, men and cattle, bag and baggage.

Sheriff Mabry and his party rode on slowly through the night, reaching the Throop Ranch in the Gonzalez valley about daylight.

They were joyfully received by George and Etta Throop, who were glad to learn of the extinction of Colonel Double-edge; but their joy was turned into mourning when they were informed of the death of the devoted Chinguapin.

The lad had greatly endeared himself to his friends at the ranch, who had hoped to be able in time to well reward him for his services to them.

He was buried by the side of his sister, but was not laid away to be forgotten.

There was great joy in Gonzalez the next day and night, and the wiping out of Devil Dick, the Double-edged Desperado, and his partner was the occasion of such a jubilee as had not been witnessed in a long time.

When his friends returned to the ranch they found a great change for the better in Walter Brandis, and with the nursing of Etta Throop his wound speedily healed and he rapidly regained strength.

When he was fully recovered he was married to that young lady, and settled down in Gonzalez as a surveyor and land agent.

George Throop managed the ranch in the valley without further molestation from any cattle barons or their brutal pards, and soon developed it into a valuable property.

Jephtha Jones had very good luck with his circus, the next season, and thereafter traveled far and wide, but without forgetting the friends with whom he had passed through such stirring scenes.

The gallant Cripps was at the wedding of Walter Brandis and Etta Throop, and heartily congratulated both the bride and the groom.

"It is better that you should have got her, Walter," said he. "She is too valuable to be thrown away on a soldier who must knock about the country and make the best of a hard life 'on poor pay."

When the career of Colonel Double-edge and its close were related to the people of Sandstone, his friends and some of his enemies obstinately refused to believe that he was identical with the Jim Sartine who had been the popular marshal of that thieving town.

"Some other man," they persisted in saying, in spite of all the proof that was presented to them.

But, Jephtha Jones and his friends knew better, and it is certain that Jim Sartine was never seen in Sandstone again.

THE END.

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